

The Monster Catcher
by
Elizabeth Klein

The people of Grim waited all winter for the Monster Catcher to arrive. The menfolk needed his expertise because overnight their tools grew blunt or vanished altogether. The women expected him to locate the gremlins that stole socks from their laundry baskets. All the girls and boys with monsters lurking under their beds were relieved when he caught them. Many had slept with softball bats, just in case. Everyone looked forward to his coming and yet everyone feared him too.

The reason for that was because someone in Grim always dropped dead when the Monster Catcher came.

It had been a long, wild, unpredictable year in which a deadly virus had struck Grim and therefore cancelled all the town's festivities including Halloween. Parents had to learn how to home-school their children, something in which they were ill-equipped. Shopping at the local supermarket meant wearing masks and trying hard not to cough or sneeze.

The Monster Catcher came late in the afternoon and those who saw him walking along their street trembled. They'd sneak a peek from behind curtains and corners and prayed under their breath they wouldn't be the ones who dropped dead.

The first to spot him was Tom Flannery as he pitched a fine cricket ball to his friend, George Riddle. The sound of a loud crack followed as George struck it and ran to the opposite wicket, blond hair wild in the blustery wind. The stranger caught the cricket ball in his free hand. He had to reach out, straightening his arm to catch it and Tom, surprised by the fine catch, suddenly froze. George spun around and stared at the man holding his ball with suspicion, but then recognition registered on his face too. His blue eyes grew wide like saucers and his flushed face had grown white like his mother's petunias. The cricket bat he was holding fell from his hands into the dust.

The stranger was dressed in a smart black suit with a black hat on his head. His tanned face looked youthful, despite his thick, grey hair. He held a black suitcase in his other hand. In fact, everything about him—except his hair—was black.

'Hello boys,' called the stranger, oblivious to the reaction his presence caused. 'You play cricket well.'

Neither boy acknowledged his praise.

The man tossed the ball to George. 'You brothers?'

Tom shook his head. 'Just friends.'

'Just friends, eh? Know who I am?' he asked, stepping closer.

'Yeah,' said Tom, shielding his eyes with his hand. 'Pa says you're the Monster Catcher.'

'That's right son,' the man said and placed his suitcase down on the grass as if he meant to engage them in conversation for a while.

Tom swallowed a lump that got snagged in his throat. His mouth had dried up like the creek out the back of his house during the last drought. He'd never spoken to the Monster Catcher before.

The man wiped his brow with a hanky from his back pocket. 'I was wondering if either of you had heard of any unusual activity in Grim this past year?'

Tom didn't want to mention the strange fairy ring that had sprung up overnight on their back lawn. Hadn't even mentioned it to George. It was a perfect circle of pale toadstools with wide-brimmed caps. Maybe that really wasn't all that unusual. He bit his tongue and said nothing. George just shook his head and shrugged.

'No matter,' said the man and glanced toward the street where lights started to glimmer and the sound of faint voices of people in their houses as they returned home from work. The Monster Catcher opened his suitcase, reached in and pulled out two small satchels, each tied at the neck with a thin gold string. He held them out for the boys to take. 'This is to keep the bogymen away. Don't put it away in your drawers, but keep it next to your beds. They don't like the smell.'

Despite never hearing of any bogymen in Grim, Tom took one of the bags and noticed a gold image of a mirror on it with tiny, intricate curlicues around its frame.

'What's that on it?' he asked.

'Oh, the mirror?' said the Monster Catcher with casual interest. 'Catching monsters is all about mirrors. Don't you boys know all mirrors are magical in some way?'

'No,' George said. 'How are they magical?'

'How, you ask?' said the man. 'Well, what happened to the mirror in Snow White? No one knows where it went. What if it's still around somewhere? Ever thought of that?' Tom never thought about fairy tales. He was a boy after all. 'Remember it belonged to the evil step-mother? Well, what did she do with it? And what about the mirror in Beauty and the Beast that allowed her to visit it nightly? Pretty amazing, eh? But what happened to it? Where'd it get to? Let's not forget the mirror in Alice and the Looking Glass which allowed Alice into her dream world? That was pretty awesome too.'

What happened to that mirror? And have you heard of the magic mirror of Matsuyama which allowed her to believe her dead mother was always with her?' Tom frowned and shook his head. *Never heard that one before.* George, wide-eyed, stared at him. 'Well, I guess you boys don't know the power of mirrors, for good or evil purposes. But they're very real, and oh, so cunning as they hide their powers from us.'

'Are our mirrors magical?' George asked.

'Absolutely!' the Monster Catcher assured him as George smelled the nefarious contents of his satchel. He grimaced at the stinking herbs inside.

Tom made a face when he sniffed it, too. 'That's stinks.'

The Monster Catcher grinned and picked up his suitcase. 'There's no perfume in repellents, son, but they work like a treat against dark creatures that wish you harm. Their sense of smell is much sharper than yours or mine and they'd smell it a mile away. It means they'll leave you alone. Don't you want to be safe when you sleep?'

George smelled it again and his face contorted. 'Is it free, mister?'

'Sure,' said the Monster Catcher. He then tipped his hat to the boys. 'Well, best be off. Might see you boys later tonight.'

Please, please don't come to our house, Tom's mind hissed.

The boys watched as he continued down the street with his steady, unhurried stride. The wind gusted around the oval and shifted more of the dead leaves around. Afternoon shadows looked more like clawed hands inching closer to where they stood. Tom shivered and George licked his dry lips. Neither seemed to want to continue their game of cricket.

'You think all that stuff he said about mirrors being magical is true?' George asked Tom.

'Nah,' he answered. 'There's no such thing as magical mirrors. He was talking about fairy tales and they're just stories.'

'But when a mirror breaks, don't you have seven years of bad luck? Isn't that what happened to Ben Hillier? Ma told me he smashed his mirror in a rage one day when he was drunk. Then his tractor blew up, his crops blighted, someone robbed his pigs and then his farm burnt down and his wife left.'

'Just superstition,' Tom assured his friend, though he'd also heard those stories about Ben Hillier. The back of his scalp prickled. 'Don't go believing in that stuff, or you'll make it happen.'

George swallowed. 'You had anything unusual happen over at your place lately?'

Tom shook his head. He squinted at his friend. 'You?'

'Nah.'

‘That’s good, isn’t it? That Monster Catcher doesn’t have to come calling at our houses then. We’re safe.’ His grumbling stomach reminded him to hurry home for his dinner in case the Monster Catcher came calling early. George, pulling up the wicket, had similar thoughts. Orange and amber streaked the dusky sky and a warm autumn wind rustled the dead leaves on the oval. ‘Come on, lights gone. Race you home.’

Both boys slapped palms, Monster Catcher momentarily forgotten, then raced in the direction of their houses at opposite ends of the street. Both palms slapped the traffic sign. Both boys laughed, breathless, then took off for home in opposite directions. Tom guessed it was a tie, as both were swift runners in races at school. He slapped the front door about the time George did, threw it open and hurried into the kitchen to locate his mother. His father wouldn’t be home yet from the foundry.

‘Monster Catcher’s in town,’ he called.

The peeler in his mother’s hand clattered on the sink as she dropped it. She turned to look at him, suddenly white as the new paint on the fence. ‘Where Tom? Where did you see him?’

He sat on one of the kitchen chairs. ‘He just spoke with George and me at the oval. Then he was heading here, to town.’ He fished for the satchel in his pocket and placed it on the table. ‘Gave us both one of these to keep the bogymen away.’

His mother picked it up and stared at it for a few seconds, then sniffed it and threw it in the bin.

‘Hey—!’ Tom called.

‘What’d he say?’ his mother interrupted. ‘Tell me!’

‘Just a lot of stuff about fairy tales and mirrors. Said they were all magical.’ He grinned. ‘As if.’

‘You didn’t happen to mention the fairy ring, did you?’ She looked at Tom intensely, as if his answer meant life or death.

‘No. Is it still there?’

With a ragged sigh, his mother slumped in the chair opposite and nodded. ‘Best not say anything about it, if he calls that is.’ She glanced at the wall clock and chewed her bottom lip. ‘Your father’s normally home by now. Where could he be?’

Just then, a loud knock at the front door made his mother gasp. Her hand flew to her mouth. Tom noticed how it trembled. He couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. The Monster Catcher seemed like a normal sort of man—maybe a bit eccentric, but nobody to fear.

His mother rose and hurried to answer the door. Tom held his breath, but he could tell it was the Monster Catcher by the way his mother spoke. He

stood up, pushed the chair under the table and waited for them to appear. He couldn't understand why his heart pounded so fast all of a sudden and his hands felt clammy. *Guess that's a natural reaction when the Monster Catcher comes calling.*

'Ah, we meet again, Tom Flannery,' he said and removed his hat.

'Hello, sir,' he said. His tongue flicked out to wet his top lip. 'We don't have any unusual activity here.'

'Ah,' the man said and tapped the side of his nose with his right forefinger. 'But I believe you're wrong, son. I sniffed out some strong vibes all over you earlier.'

'How?' his mother asked, her voice weak. 'What kind of unusual activity?'

The man put down his suitcase. 'Monster disturbance out the back. Do you have a fairy ring on your back lawn?'

'Yes, but—' His mother started, looking at him aghast.

'My good lady, it's a perfect magnet for fae creatures. Once they've zeroed in on a place, it's difficult to extract them. Rather like going to the dentist and telling him you have nothing wrong, when in fact, he has to remove one of your teeth which is rotten at the roots.'

'Oh dear. Then...how can we get rid of them?' his mother asked, looking beside herself with worry.

'Good lady, let me deal with them, as they can be downright dangerous,' the Monster Catcher said in a solemn voice. 'Lead me to the fairy ring. And remain here while I work.'

'But—'

His mother shot Tom a dark look and he clamped his mouth shut. *But that would be so much fun,* he wanted to say.

The Monster Catcher followed his mother and a few minutes later, she returned and sat down at the kitchen table once more. Tom sat with her, but he was itching to see how the Monster Catcher operated. But there was no way his mother would allow it. He had a plan.

'Need the bathroom,' he told his mother.

'Don't go near him. Come straight back.' She eyed him as if she had read his mind. He nodded, hurried down the hall and shut the bathroom door loud enough for her to hear. The Monster Catcher's suitcase sat on the dining table. Its lid was open. Tom crept nearer and took a peek inside. Lots of satchels like the one he and George received were inside. He stole to the back door and positioned himself behind the back window. Slowly, he pulled back the curtain so he could see what was happening outside.

The Monster Catcher knelt on the grass and held what appeared to be a small hand mirror aimed at the fairy ring. Tom froze and covered his mouth from screaming as monstrous creatures shot out of the centre of the ring into the mirror like some bizarre extraction. Large, hairy black things he had no name for as well as smaller, scrabbling things—all trying to some extent to resist the pull of the magic mirror. They writhed and were stretched until they could squeeze their elongated bodies inside with a swift whoosh. Tom stared in frozen fascination. Then the magic of the mirror blinked out with flash of bright light. Quiet darkness descended once more on the back yard.

Tom exhaled the breath he'd held and sagged against the wall. From his vantage point, he could see the Monster Catcher place the mirror inside a low, wooden case and close its lid. Then he picked it up and rose to his feet as if to come inside the house again.

Tom hastened back to the kitchen and sat on a chair moments before the Monster Catcher appeared with a huge smile on his face. Tom noticed he had left his suitcase and hat on the table in the dining room.

'Well, I think all your monster problems are taken care of, sweet lady,' he said and pulled a chair out from under the table as if to sit down. Tom's mother stared at him with wide-eyed terror. She wrung her hands on the apron tied about her waist. 'May I trouble you for a cup of tea for my trouble?'

Tom's mother jumped to her feet. 'Sorry for my rudeness in not offering you anything.' She filled the kettle with water and clattered with cups and saucers from the sideboard.

'That's all right,' he said. 'No need to stress.'

'I've got homework to finish,' said Tom.

'Off you go then,' his mother said and waved her hand.

Tom left the two adults to talk about monsters, but he wanted to see those monsters he extracted from the fairy ring for himself. Instead of heading to his bedroom, he redirected his steps toward the man's suitcase, keeping one eye on the kitchen. His mother was offering him a sweet biscuit with his tea. All her attention was on the Monster Catcher.

Good.

The suitcase, on its side on the table, appeared somewhat shabby that close. Tom noticed how some of the black surface of the case had worn away. He knew if he wanted to peek at the magic mirror, he needed to open one catch at a time, placing a finger on the part that flicked up so he wouldn't be heard.

Once he started, he was surprised at how quiet the suitcase was to open. Soon he was looking at the low box which housed the mirror. *Here goes.*

He flicked open the lid as quietly as he dared, keeping an eye in the direction of the kitchen. There, on a black velvet cloth, lay a small mirror with an opalescent handle and back. The actual mirror lay face down.

What would happen if he took a quick look?

His hand reached out and picked up the mirror. Turning it over, he noticed not his own reflection, but a cloud-like haze swirling about in its depths.

Then the horror began.

It started with a tingling in his fingers, hands and his arms. The mirror fell from his nerveless fingers. Next moment, they were stretching out before his shocked eyes like elastic. Thinner and longer. The mirror was pulling him inside. A scream wrenched from his throat as he tried to resist, but it was too strong. Howls and shrieks came from within the mirror and clawed hands sought his. They scratched and bit his arms till a scream was torn from the depths of his being. Tom was about to die and there was nothing he could do about it.

A strong hand grabbed the back of his jacket and something black fell across the mirror's surface. Tom found himself lying on his back on the dining room floor. A concerned Monster Catcher stared into his face, clicking his fingers in front of Tom's eyes. His mother stood there, eyes red from sobbing.

'Tom, are you all right?' asked the Monster Catcher.

Tom nodded and sat up. 'What happened?'

'You did something very foolish that could have cost you your life,' he said. 'If I had been any later, you would have been inside the mirror, along with all the monsters. Remember I told you about magical mirrors? They're all dangerous.'

Tom nodded and clambered to his feet. He noticed the mirror was back in its case. His mother dabbed at her wet eyes with a crumpled hanky.

'Why do you always have to look?' she scolded.

The Monster Catcher answered for him. 'You mustn't blame your son for being curious. There's no harm done...this time.'

'So that's how you catch the monsters?' Tom asked, feeling a little woozy.

'Now you know my secret,' the man said and gathered his hat and suitcase. He tipped his hat to Tom's mother. 'Well, best be off. Tom will be all right. Just needs his dinner.'

Tom's mother cast a swift look at the wall clock. Tom knew she was worried about his father, who should have been home well before five. It was now six o'clock.

He stopped himself from thinking the worst as he trailed behind the Monster Catcher as he walked to the front door. His mother let him out and he wandered away down the street. He'd have other houses to visit to ply his strange craft. They stood on the porch and stared in the direction of his father's work, almost willing to see him walking home.

'He's not dead, Mum,' Tom muttered.

His mother turned and disappeared inside, leaving him to his silent vigil. Street lights glimmered and he could see people through their windows, hear faint voices on the wind. And in the distance, a lone figure approached. Tom stared. He was always glad to see his father, though filthy from his day at the foundry, eyes bright when he came through the front door.

Far off, Tom could see him smiling.

'He's here, Mum,' he yelled, then leapt from the porch and raced towards him.

That night, as his family gathered for dinner, Tom's heart swelled with love for them. A strange gratefulness overcame him and he felt as light as a soap bubble rising in the air. Not even the odd thinness and length of his hands and fingers seemed to matter.