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# Touched

*by Dennis Humphrey*

Folks say I got an uncommon memory, which is true, I suppose. I didn't always. They also say I'm uncommon mature for my age. I wasn't always that way, either, though I guess that's true of most folks they say that about. People imagine they're being nice to me when they say these things. I can see that. Still, if they knew when and how I got this way... I don't know. Maybe they would leave off bragging on me about it. Maybe. And maybe then I could learn how to forget, and maybe then I could go back to being just a kid again. But, then again, I don't think I could ever learn to forget about Edgar.

We had always been best friends, since before we even started to kindergarten together. As a matter of fact, I can't remember a time when we wasn't best friends. We used to meet nearly every day out in the big lot between our houses to play. To us, that lot was ours. Some time before either of us could remember, there used to be a house on that lot, but all that was left when we claimed it was a crumbling foundation and a cement sidewalk and steps that led up to a door that wasn't there anymore. The steps to nowhere. There was tall grass and there was thick bushes with white flowers all around the foundation, but for some reason the ground inside the foundation had stayed mostly bare dirt, which was fine by us. Inside the wall of bushes, that bare patch of ground was the center of every world we could dream up. It was funny how the height of those thick bushy walls, the area of that bare patch of ground had shrunk so much over such a short number of years. This last summer, someone knocked down those old foundations and cleaned out all the bushes, leaving only the steps to nowhere and the bare patch. Then they pulled a brand new double-wide up to the steps, just like that was what the steps had been there for all along. I wish sometimes I could see that lot again the way it was when it was ours, but I guess that can't happen. It don't matter anyways. I wouldn't have no use for it nomore. Not since what happened to Edgar.

That was a couple years ago, when we was in the second grade. Edgar got sick, bad sick. It was right before Christmas, and I remember feeling sorry for him missing out on all the candy and cookies and stuff. We didn't have much in the way of treats through the year, neither of our families, so the Christmas candy and cookies and such was a big deal. I had the idea of saving some of mine for him, but somehow he kept not getting better, and there wasn't any sense in letting it go to waste, so I'd eat the old and save some of the new and wait. He had already been sick for several days when Christmas actually rolled around, so I went over to his house with a paper lunch sack of candy and cookies I'd managed to put aside to see if he was better. I stepped up onto the big front porch. Edgar's house had one of them covered wooden porches that went all the way across the front of the house. Usually, his family kept that front porch swept clean as a whistle, but that day, there was snow drifted up on the upwind edge, and what was even more strange, there was mud tracked from the steps right up to the front door. I knocked on the old screen door that covered the front door, and it banged and rattled against the door frame the way old screen doors do when you knock on them. It had a rusty old spring that would pull it to again whenever it was opened, and I could hear that rusty spring rattle and hum for a second after I quit knocking. That's how quiet it was.

Edgar's mom answered the door. Edgar's mama always looked like she was tired, like she hadn't slept much, not that she was homely or anything. She always dressed nice and put on makeup and had her hair fixed as nice as anyone I ever saw, but she couldn't get rid of the tired look. That day she looked tired even for her. She squinted through the rusty screen door at me in the bright white of the rare Christmas snow.

I asked her, "Can Edgar come out?"

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"No," she said, "he—he ain't feeling well."

Her voice was kind of shaky, like she was about to cry or something. It was then I begun to think something was more wrong than I thought before.

I asked her, "When will he be able to come out?"

She didn't say nothing. She just sort of made the kind of face that people make when they're trying hard not to cry but can't help it, her face twisting and twitching this way and that. Then she just busted out crying and ran off into the other room. She left the door wide open and everything. I didn't know what to do, standing there with my bag of half-eat candy, but I knew that something must be bad wrong. Just then Edgar's dad come to the door. He kind of stumbled a little, and he almost spilled his drink. Edgar's dad had a face like a toad-frog's back, and he had a voice to match—dark and rough and warty. "Edgar won't be able to come out," he said, "not for quite some time."

I asked him, "Is Edgar gonna be okay?"

He waited a second before answering, a long second, like he had to think about it. Then he said, "Of course he will. Now run along home." Then he closed the door.

I knew he was lying, like grown-ups do when they know something that they don't want you to know because they figure you're not old enough to understand. So they just leave you wondering, like that's better. By my reckoning, the wondering is a lot worse than just knowing. Anyways, it didn't matter. I had a way of finding out.

**Y**ou see, the furnace in Edgar's house was in the basement, and so was all the heat ducts. By putting your ear next to the ducts you could hear what was going on in the rooms up above because the sound came right on down the vents. We used to do that all the time to listen to what grown-ups would say when we wasn't around. All we had to do was sneak down through the basement window. That day as I was trying to find out about Edgar, I was sneaking my way back behind the bushes beside Edgar's house, and my feet crunched on the ice from the water that dripped off the ends of the icicles on the edge of the roof. It reminded me of the time we had the ice storm, just about a year before that, when we first heard the monster.

We had snuck down as usual to try to hear the grown-ups say what Edgar was getting for Christmas. Just as we got down there though, we heard his mom's car start up outside. We could tell it was his mom's car because his dad always drove a truck that made a whole different sound, deeper and growling.

"Aw shoot!" Edgar said, "we missed 'em."

"Well," I said, "maybe they didn't all leave. Maybe if we stay here a minute we can still hear something."

And Edgar said, "Yeah." So we stayed and listened. We listened to almost every vent in the house without hearing a thing. Then we decided to listen to the vent in his sister Hope's room. She was in the eighth grade and thought that made her some kind of big shot or something. Anyways, we liked to listen to her vent so we could find out stuff to tease her about. I remember we'd follow along behind her as she walked to school chanting, "Hope/ess, Hope/ess, Hopeless-Hopeless-Hope/ess." That was usually just enough to make her huff up and pretend we wasn't there, but when we'd break out the stuff we heard through her vent, that really got her. One time we heard her and her friend Ginny Lynn talking about that Hughes boy, Walter.

Ginny Lynn said, "Truth or dare: what boy is the best kisser you ever kissed?"

And Hope said, "Ginny!" And they both giggled like girls do. "Okay, okay, okay, what's the dare?"

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And Ginny Lynn said, "You have to kiss the *worst* kisser you ever kissed."

And Hope hollers, "Eeeww! Not Reggie Newell!" And that set off a whole new round of giggling and eeeww-ing, which I could understand since Reggie Newell had a face like a road kill possum, and smelled like the same possum a week later.

And finally Hope said, "Well, that was in the first grade. I didn't know no better."

And Ginny Lynn said, "Dang, girl. You should've gone with the truth in the first place, because if you ain't gonna kiss Reggie, you still got to come clean with the truth."

"Alright, alright, alright," Hope said. "Walter Hughes." Then the giggling and squealing got so loud me and Edgar didn't even need the vent. We grinned at each other because we knew what was gonna happen the next day on the way to school.

"Hope and Walter sittin' in a tree, K-i-S-s-I-n-G..."

Hope wheeled around, her mouth wide open. "How do you brats know about that?"

"Oh, you don't like that one," Edgar said. "How about this one?" And we started in on "Hope and Reggie sittin' in a tree..."

She didn't say nothing to that. She just took out after us like she was gonna kill us both. She tackled Edgar in a big pile of leaves in old man McClosky's yard, and when I seen she had him down, I ran over and jumped on her back. It was then I seen she wasn't killing him at all, but tickling him, and she rolled me off into the leaves and tickled me too, saying "Oh yeah, how you little monsters liking *that*?" And we all three was laughing and rolling around until old man McClosky hollered "Hey you kids. It took me all day to rake them leaves!" and we all got up and run toward school, leaves trailing behind us, and old man McClosky cussing like a sailor.

Anyways, that first day we heard the monster, after we missed hearing about Edgar's Christmas presents, we put our ears to the vent under Hope's room to see if we could get some more stuff to tease her with. After a second, we heard a little snorting and wheezing sound. We listened for a second, trying to figure out what it was. Then Edgar said in a loud whisper, "Snoring! She's snoring!"

We started to laugh so hard that we had to put our hands over our mouths to keep from giving ourselves away. Snoring! Now that was funny. She was always trying to act so stuck up and prissy, and there she was up there sounding like someone trying to start a broke-down chainsaw.

"Wait 'til everyone gets a load of this!" Edgar said.

"Yeah," I said. Then I asked, "Say, what's she doing up there asleep anyways?"

"She's been feeling sick all day," Edgar said.

"Oh," I said. Then I was about to say something else; I don't remember now what it was, but before I could say it, we started hearing loud footsteps. Most of the rooms in Edgar's house had rugs in them, which kept footsteps from being loud in those rooms. But some of the rooms, like the kitchen and the bathrooms and the hallway, still had just wood floors. That's where the footsteps was coming from, the hallway. They didn't sound like normal footsteps either. They was slow and loud and heavy and every few steps they stumbled a little. We looked at each other and stopped laughing while we tried to figure out what it was. They sounded to me like the kind of footsteps a Frankenstein or a zombie might make. I could tell that Edgar was thinking the same thing. The footsteps got almost right over our heads, but then they got quieter. Whatever it was, it'd just walked onto a rug, which meant it'd gone into one of the rooms--

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Hope's room. We put our ears closer up against the vent duct to hear better.

At first, all we heard was snoring. Then we could hear the bedsprings squeak, like someone had just sat on the edge of the bed. She kept on snoring for a couple of seconds, then she stopped in the middle of a snore. I figure that's when she woke up and saw the monster. She tried to scream, I think, but something was over her mouth and you couldn't hardly hear it. Next, I figured it must've attacked her, because I could hear a lot of wrestling around going on. The bed started to squeak and squeak, and you could hear the monster moaning and groaning, just like the Frankensteins and zombies do in the movies. Hope was still trying to scream, but you still couldn't hardly hear it. The wrestling went on for I don't know how long. It's hard to tell about time when you're scared out of your wits. Then it just stopped, and it was quiet for a minute, except we could hear Hope crying real soft. We looked at each other. I could tell Edgar was scared, and I knew I was. We just stood there in the quiet, afraid to move or even breathe, afraid the monster would hear us.

Then the footsteps started up again, going down the hallway, slow and loud and heavy. It was headed toward the front of the house, and I figured it was making for the front door. But I couldn't tell for sure because we lost track of it when it got to the rug in the hall right where the front door and the archway into the living room was.

After a minute I said, "Do you think it's gone?"

"I don't know," Edgar said. "Do you?"

I just sort of shrugged my shoulders and asked, "What about your sister?"

He said, "I guess we better go see if she's okay, huh?"

And I said "Yeah."

So we snuck back out the basement window and snuck around the house to the front porch. We stopped there for a second, peeking up over the edge of the porch at the rusty old screen door. My heart was beating so hard and fast I could feel it banging around on the inside of my chest. Then we waited, that long second you always wait before doing something that scares the life out of you, when you look for something, anything to happen that would change things so you wouldn't have to do whatever it was you had to do. You know nothing like that is gonna happen, but you still wait that long second. Then it always comes down to you. Either you start moving, or you don't. If you do, then you've got it mostly beat. If you don't, then it's got you beat cold, and it leaves you hating yourself because you couldn't do it. That's happened to me. That's how I know.

As we crouched behind the edge of the porch, we looked at each other. When we did, we both saw that we had to go in there. We had to do it, if not for Hope, then for each other. I guess that's why we did it.

"Reckon we gotta go inside," Edgar said.

"Yeah," I said. "Reckon we do."

We climbed up onto the porch and snuck up to the door. He pulled back the screen door as slow as he could. I swear I thought you could have heard those squeaky hinges all the way down the street. He turned the knob and eased the door open. As soon as we was in the hall, we heard a moan come from out of the living room.

Both of us froze, afraid to move an inch, but it seemed our eyes just couldn't stand not knowing where the sound had come from. They eased themselves over toward the archway on the right, which led to the living room. There was Edgar's dad, passed out on the couch. At first I thought the monster had got him

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too on its way out. Then I saw the empty whiskey bottle on the floor.

Edgar rolled his eyes and started to breathe again, which reminded me to start breathing again too. We started up the hall toward Hope's room, but I still didn't like not knowing where the monster went. I whispered to Edgar, "Hey, what if it doubled back into Hope's room?"

**E**dgar's eyes got wide. He looked around for a second and then eased up to the credenza halfway down the hall to Hope's room. There was a bunch of knick-knacks on it, and Edgar picked up the biggest one, a heavy statue of praying hands. Gripping it by the fingers with its square base upwards, so it almost looked like he was trying to shake hands with it, he swung it like a baseball bat a couple times. I got the idea and picked up the next biggest knick-knack, a copy of one of them big stone heads that are on one of them islands in the South Pacific somewhere. It didn't really have a smaller end like the hands, so it was pretty clumsy to swing, but I guessed it was better than nothing. Edgar was the best batter on our T Ball team the summer before. I seen him smack the ball all the way to the fence more than once, so I reckoned he should have the better club if we needed one. I nodded at Edgar, and we crept up to Hope's door.

The monster was nowhere to be seen, and Hope was huddled up in the corner of the room, like a dog that's just been whipped and doesn't know what for. She was still crying, and she was shaking.

Edgar went up to her, reaching out like you do to a skittish horse you're afraid might bolt if you move too quick. "Hope? You okay, Hope?"

She didn't say nothing. He tried and tried to get her to talk, but she wouldn't answer. She just cried and rocked herself, looking at the wall like she could see straight through it into hell itself.

Even after a year she hadn't said a word, nothing at all. She just cried and rocked and stared into nothing, except she shook all over when there was grown men around. It was weird. One time I heard some grown-ups talking about her, saying she was "touched." I asked my dad what that meant.

He said, "It means *crazy*."

I asked him, "What does being touched have to do with being crazy?"

And he said, "A lot of folks believe that the Lord watches out for people that are too weak to watch out for themselves, like babies and crazy folk. The word actually comes from the saying 'touched by the hand of God,' which means that God is looking out for them."

I couldn't see what God was doing to look after her. After that first time, we heard the monster come back several times, and every time it came back it went after Hope, never anyone else, just Hope. I just didn't get it.

Me and Edgar wanted to tell someone about it, but it just ain't easy for a couple of kids to convince grown-ups that there's monsters in the neighborhood.

I remember asking my dad, "Daddy, do you believe in monsters?"

He looked at me like he was trying to see if I was serious. When he saw I was, he said, "Well, that depends on what kind of monsters you're talking about."

I shrugged, "I don't know. Frankensteins and zombies and such, I guess."

He said, "Son, those kind of monsters are make believe."

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And I said, "What if I told you there was one that goes into Edgar's house and goes after Hope?"

My dad leaned forward in his chair and looked at me like he was trying to read some secret written on my forehead. "Why, did you see something?"

And I said, "No."

And he said "Well, then what makes you think there's a monster after Hope?"

I didn't want to give away our secret way of finding things out through the vents, so I just said, "I heard things."

"What things?" Daddy said.

And I said, "Scary footsteps, moaning, crying. You know, monster stuff."

**M**y dad sat back and thought a second, and then he just said, "I understand there's something wrong with Hope, and that has you and your friend Edgar very worried, but do you really think that Frankenstein's monster himself or some zombie from the movies is the reason behind it?"

"I guess not," I said, looking down. I mean, what else could I say? Edgar said he had an even worse reaction than that when he tried to tell his old man. Said his old man hauled off and smacked him.

I was thinking about that as I slid down through the window into Edgar's basement when I was trying to find out what was wrong with him, and I wondered what Edgar's old man would do to me if he found me sneaking around the basement after he told me to go home. It did feel kind of weird being down there without Edgar. We'd always gone down there together, and besides, it was his basement, but I couldn't figure no other way to find out what was wrong with Edgar, since the grown-ups didn't see fit to tell me. Then I realized that he was there, only he was upstairs and I was downstairs, so that made me feel a little better at least. I knew exactly which vent went to Edgar's room, but I figured I could find out more about what was wrong with Edgar if I listened to the grown-ups who was talking in the kitchen.

"It ain't natural," I heard his grandma say. "It just ain't natural. First her, going all crazy and not speaking for a year now, and now he's got a higher fever than any human ought to be able to live over and screaming bloody murder at all times of the day and night. Some devil's got a hold of this family."

And Edgar's Aunt Collie said, "Now Mama, you're just getting carried away."

"You go on and don't believe," his grandma said, "but I know. There's evil at work here."

And Edgar's Aunt Collie said, "Now Mama, talk like that ain't going to help."

"It's the only thing that will help," his grandma said. "If you young folks would just listen to me. You think I'm just some old uneducated woman, gone senile. You think you know so much about the world, but you don't know. I come from a time when the world was just a little bit younger than it is now, and a whole lot bigger than it is now. Now you young folks think that everything's got to have a scientific explanation, like God done died and gone out of Heaven and the Devil done died and gone out of Hell. Of course, that's just what the Devil wants you to think. It makes his job a whole lot easier."

"Mama," Edgar's aunt said, "Edgar's just sick. There ain't nothing mysterious about that."

"Oh?" his grandma said. "Then how come that doctor couldn't tell you what was wrong with him?"

And his Aunt Collie said, "Well, it's not a common sort of sickness Edgar has. The doctor just needs to do

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a little research, that's all."

"Ha!" said his grandma, "it's more common than you know, and that doctor ain't going to find it in none of his medical books."

Then I heard some loud footsteps come up the hall, real slow and heavy, but they didn't sound like the monster's. Besides, the monster only came when the grown-ups was gone and Edgar's dad was too drunk to stop it, so I wasn't scared.

Then I heard Edgar's dad's toad-frog voice. "What the devil are you women talking about?" he said. I heard the refrigerator door open.

Edgar's aunt said, "Mama's convinced there's something evil in this house." I heard the refrigerator door close.

"Evil?" his dad asked. I heard a cracking sound. "What kind of evil?" I heard a clinking, tinkling sound.

"The worst kind," his grandma said. I heard the refrigerator door open again. "The kind that hides itself where you'd never think you'd have to look for it, in the places where it never ought to be." The refrigerator closed again. "It just waits there in its hiding place till it finds out your weaknesses. And then when you're at your weakest, it gets you, but it still doesn't reveal itself completely because the longer it can stay hid, the more damage it can do, a little at a time. Look what it's already done to Hope, and now Edgar's suffering from it too."

Edgar's dad laughed. "Oh Mama Lucy, you're just being silly."

"Silly?" she said back. "Have you not heard that boy scream? Ain't no ailment but evil could make him scream like that. Something's haunting that boy. Something awful."

Then Edgar's dad just sort of snickered and said, "Mama Lucy, sometimes I just don't know about you."

Then I heard some light footsteps come clicking up the hall and go in the kitchen.

And Edgar's dad said, "Well, you feeling any better?"

"What are y'all talking about?" Edgar's mom asked.

And Edgar's dad said, "We were just talking about how much good it would do you to get out of the house for a little while."

"What?" she said. "With Edgar sick like he is?"

And Edgar's dad said, "Now you know the doctor said that you couldn't do a thing for him besides let him rest."

"But someone has got to stay with him," she said, "in case something happens."

"I'll stay," his dad said.

"In your condition?" his mom said.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" he said, his voice was even rougher and wartier than normal. She didn't answer. "Go on," he said. "Go down to the evening Christmas services. Who knows, maybe you can pray up a miracle or something."

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"You!" Edgar's grandma said. I wouldn't have wanted to be on the receiving end of that "You!" but Edgar's dad just laughed.

"Maybe we should go down to the services," his aunt said before anyone else could say anything. Her voice was a little shaky. "It'll sure make you feel better."

They was all quiet then for a second.

"But Edgar..." his mom started to say.

"...will be just fine," his aunt finished. "Maybe without a house-full of people around here he'll be able to rest better. Now you go on and take mother out to the car while I get my purse."

"Well," his mom said, the way you do when you're not really sure about something. "Okay."

Then I heard their light footsteps go up the hall to the front door. When the screen door shut behind them with a loud squeak and bang, Edgar's aunt said, "You're really something."

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "You're no angel yourself."

There was quiet for a second. Then I heard the refrigerator open again.

"You're supposed to be looking after Edgar," she said. "Can't you at least lay off long enough to do that?"

"Why don't you lay off?" he said back. "Go on now. You mom and sister are waiting out there for you."

And she said, "Why are you in such a hurry for us to leave, anyway?"

"Maybe I'm just tired of looking at you," he answered.

"You fucking son of a..." Edgar's aunt said, almost hissing.

Edgar's dad laughed at that. I sometimes laugh when I hear curse words, too, but I wasn't laughing then. "Well, you oughta know," he said.

Edgar's aunt didn't say anything after that. She just clacked on down the hall toward the front door, fast, and Edgar's dad followed her like he was making sure she was gone. I heard the loud creak and bang of the door opening and closing. Then I heard Edgar's dad's slow heavy footsteps go off onto the living room rug. Then I couldn't hear them anymore. Outside, Edgar's mom's car started up and drove away.

I took my ear away from the duct. I hadn't really heard anything about what was wrong with Edgar, just that it was pretty bad. I stood for a minute, looking around and wondering what to do next. I wondered what would happen to Edgar. The moldy air and the mothball smell from all the stuff that Edgar's mom put down there in boxes started to make my nose tingle, like it usually did. I almost sneezed. It made me think about the last time we was down there in the basement together. It was a little more than a week before. We was listening to find out what Edgar was getting for Christmas, like we usually did. That was also the last time we had heard the monster. It was weird too, I mean, weirder than usual. The monster came and went after Hope, and we heard the same sounds, the footsteps, the squeaking bed, the moaning, the crying. But that time the monster also seemed to be mumbling something too, instead of just moaning like usual. I couldn't really make out what it was saying, and I figured it was some kind of monster talk I couldn't understand. I pulled my ear away and looked at Edgar to see if he could understand it. Edgar was standing there with his eyes and mouth wide open, and his face was watery white like the skim milk my mom always pours over her grits. He was shaking and sweating like he had just seen the Devil himself. I didn't understand what was wrong with him. I mean, I knew he was scared. We was always scared when the monster was there, but I'd never seen him look like he did then, not

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ever. I asked him what was wrong, but he didn't answer. I asked him again, and I finally got his attention. All he would say was "Nothing. Nothing. It can't be. It can't." That time in the basement was the last time I saw him before he got sick.

Still no wiser about Edgar's sickness, I turned back toward the window to leave, but then I decided to listen to Edgar's vent. I couldn't hear much except rustling around and some mumbling that I couldn't quite make out, except that every now and then I could hear the word "no." It was Edgar's voice. He must have been having a bad dream or something. I started to get a real spooky feeling as I listened to him mumble and moan. There was something in his voice, something that usually wasn't there. It was kind of like the difference between the whine a dog makes when it just wants to go out or something and the kind of whine a mama dog makes when you take away one of her pups. But still, there was something else in his voice too, something I couldn't quite figure out. Whatever it was, it scared me. I don't know why, but it scared me through and through. I turned around again toward the window to leave. I was more worried than ever about Edgar, but that sound in his voice—I just couldn't stand being down there alone in that basement.

As I was climbing up to the window, I thought I heard something, so I stopped to listen. Then I heard the footsteps coming up the hall, slow and loud and kind of stumbling a little. I was so scared I froze. I didn't know what to do, so I stayed right where I was, halfway up to the window. I didn't move a muscle. The footsteps came up the hall to Hope's door. It was the monster. It went into her room, and the usual sounds started, the squeaking, the moaning, the crying. I could just barely hear because my ear wasn't against a vent, but I knew the sounds. Next I thought I heard some more footsteps, real light, so light I couldn't be really sure I heard them, like bare feet on the hallway floor. Then, after a few seconds, there was a thud, like someone heavy had just fallen out of bed on the floor, then a crash as something hard fell against the metal grate above the heat vent.

Then there was a sound the likes of which I had never heard before, nor have I since. I don't know really how to describe it, except that it sounded like a mix of a screaming panther, a crying baby, and a screeching tire. It was the kind of sound that shoots right through to your teeth and bones and rattles them, like when you scrape your fingernails down a blackboard. The sound hit me like a shot, and I was already so scared I wasn't up to wondering what it was. Then the sound quit. It didn't cut off all at once, though. It sort of trailed off first, and in that trailing off I heard something familiar. After a second the sound started up again, and a few seconds later it trailed off again. I heard the familiar sound again, and I realized what it was. It was a voice—Edgar's voice. Until then I hadn't even thought that sound had come from a person, or even could. I remembered what Edgar's grandma said about Edgar's screams and about evil, and I knew that she was right.

**A**fter that I didn't think anymore. My hands and my feet started moving all by themselves, and they pulled me up and pushed me out the window onto the crunching, slippery ice. My feet tried to move too fast over the ice, and they slipped. My hands caught me on the way down, though, and they started helping my feet push me across our vacant lot toward my house. I plunged through the bushes, over the foundation into the open space that had always been there when we needed to hide away. The empty space inside the foundation was an undisturbed field of pure white until I tumbled onto it, scrambling for traction, mixing the bare dirt underneath with the snow above into a brown slush. For the first time, the wall of bushes and the foundation was not enough shelter. The cold blue of the open sky crushed down on me like it wanted to smother me for knowing what I knew and running away. I charged on through the bushes on the other side, and scrambled on toward my house, slinging mud and dirty snow in all directions. When I got home, I went straight to my room and locked the door and huddled myself up in the corner.

In a few seconds my mom knocked on the door. "What's wrong, baby?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. I couldn't talk. I just plain couldn't. I took a few breaths and tried again—still nothing. I thought about Hope. Tears came out of my eyes, but I could make no sound.

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Mom kept knocking. "Baby, are you alright?" I wanted to tell her. I tried to answer, tried and tried and tried.

Then the sound came out of me like a dam break, and I cried.

Mom was real worried then. "Baby, open this door. Open it right now or I'm going to get your father."


I managed to get my voice working. "No mama, no-no-no. I'm okay. I'm okay."

She asked, "Well what, baby? What?"

"It's Edgar," I said. "He so sick, he's so sick, and nobody even knows what's wrong with him." I knew. I knew why the sky seemed like it would crush down me. I knew, but I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything about Hope or the "monster" or Edgar.

What I said was, "I just want to be alone for awhile." That was true.

What I said next was, "I'm okay." That was a lie.

Mom went away and left me alone, and I sat there in the corner as the sun began to go down. I knew. I looked around the room at all the bright colors on the toys and games, toys and games Edgar and I had snuck out to our vacant lot a million times. I knew then too, I don't know how I knew, but I did, that those games and toys would never be moved from their places again, until the day they was taken to the driveway for the garage sale my mom had the summer they moved that double wide into the lot. That day I found out about Edgar, as the sun went down, the room got dark, little by little. I watched as all the bright colors on all the toys and games faded and turned gray, like Kansas in the *Wizard of Oz*. That's just what I thought, and it struck me. In Oz, Dorothy saw all the colors, all the magic, but there was no grown-ups there. There was witches and wizards and Munchkins, but no grown-ups, not real ones. And all the bad things that happened was just make-believe. You always knew that Dorothy would be okay in the end. In Kansas, there was grown-ups, and there was tornadoes and old women who wanted to kill little dogs. There was the real threat that something very bad would happen, and there was no color. I sat and I watched the grays turn slowly into blacks. I sat alone in the dark and cried. And I hated myself. 

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**Dennis Humphrey's** short fiction has appeared in *storySouth*, *Southern Hum*, *Clapboard House*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *BloodLotus*, and *Spilt Milk*, and his poetry in *The Southwestern Review*, *Mid-South Review*, and *Oklahoma Review*. He holds a PhD in English with Creative Writing emphasis from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and is currently Chair of English and Fine Arts at Arkansas State University—Beebe, where he teaches writing and literature. He is also an Iraq war vet, and when not teaching or writing, he still flies helicopters for the Arkansas National Guard. Among numerous other ongoing literary projects, he is currently in training to run with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain in July 2010 in order to complete his appreciation for the novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

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