

Lydia Burleson

The Monsters Inside

12<sup>th</sup> Grade

1884 Words

## The Monsters Inside

Staring out the window of her brother's '99 Ford Explorer, Rachel watched as the open pastures and towering trees of rural Texas blended together to create a steady blur of solid color. She had been staring out at the vastness before her for the past fifteen minutes, deep in thought, contemplating her and her brother's coming visit with their mother. They were driving thirty miles to see her, and she silently prayed to herself that the visit would go well, not just for their sakes but for their mother's as well. It was Mother's Day weekend. Rachel was holding a vase of flowers—her mother's favorite stargazer lilies—a poem that she had written, and a bag of her mother's clothes. Rachel hoped that these gifts would smooth over the rough edges that had been left behind when she and her brother had parted from their mother not even a week before.

Reflecting on their last encounter with their mother, Rachel shuddered. A week ago, her mother had not been in the sanest mindset. In fact, Rachel was frightened of what she and her brother might find when they arrived for their visit. She had seen the monster trapped within her mother a week ago, and she did not know if she were prepared to see it again.

As Rachel's brother pulled into the parking lot of where their mother had been sent to stay, she stared up at the depressing brown brick building that towered over them. Looking at its darkened windows and box-like design, Rachel could no longer ignore where her mother was and why she had been sent there in the first place. Her brother parked his car and turned to Rachel, saying, "I'll meet you at the door in a second. I need to check my phone." Rachel paced around the front of her brother's car as she stared at the "Rock Creek Psychiatric Hospital" sign and remembered the events from last week that brought her family to this place.

A week ago, her mother had been fantasizing about demons infesting her house. Her mother had been convinced God had healed her mind and her body, certain that she didn't need the antipsychotic pills any longer and that He had helped her lose in two day's time the one hundred and fifty pounds of extra weight she had been carrying for most of her adult life. She had ranted and raved, spoken in tongues and then in whispers so that she would not be overheard. It was only a week since these strange events had occurred, and Rachel was not sure that she could expect things to return to normal between them, especially with the knowledge that she now possessed about the monster trapped within her mother's mind. After she had seen

this monster raise its head, Rachel was not sure she could ever be convinced it was completely subdued.

Rachel's mind turned back from that week to the present where she and her brother entered the hospital. Together, the two checked in at the front desk and patiently sat down in the waiting room, watching, waiting—simultaneously making and avoiding eye contact as everyone in the waiting room wondered the same thing about everyone else. They were all there to see someone, and they were all wondering just what type of crazy they would find.

After about half an hour, a nurse came out and looked at the two siblings. With a slight frown, she relayed, "The doctors don't think right now is the best time for your mother to have visitors. She's in a very manic state, you see. She's hyper-religious, and the doctor doesn't think it would do you or her any good. You don't want to see her this way. I can make sure she gets the card and the clothes, but..." The nurse looked at the vase of stargazer lilies that Rachel gripped tightly. "Those can only be placed in the nurse's center. Your mom will be able to see them, though." She tried to smile reassuringly.

Rachel sighed. She left the flowers and the bag of clothes with the nurse, and then she and her brother silently walked out of the hospital, almost as if they were leaving a prison but still serving the time for their mother's unavoidable crime.

Even a week later, the feeling of being imprisoned because of their mother's mental illness had not left Rachel, yet she and her brother returned to the hospital, still apprehensive and not knowing what to expect. In that weeklong break, Rachel had talked to her mother on the phone. She noted that her mother sounded different, so... unlike herself. Because of the change in her mother's voice and the change in Rachel's perspective, she did not know what to expect when she and her brother walked through that visiting room door and saw their mother sitting there in the black silk pajamas Rachel had brought a week ago. She was also wearing a huge smile—the grin of a person overly happy with life, the grin of a person who was trying to get out of her cage.

Rachel tensed at her mother's first words, "Funny running into you here!" her attempt at making a joke of the situation that was indelibly shaping the future of Rachel's teenage life. Rachel didn't laugh. Her brother didn't laugh. Instead, the two siblings looked at each other. He sighed. She sighed. Never had they expected to see their mother end up where she was, and they most certainly did not find it funny that they were having to celebrate Mother's Day a week late in a mental hospital. Neither did Rachel find it amusing that the monster in her mother's mind

was clearly sharing the meeting with them. Thinking about this monster, about its omnipresence in anything and everything related to her mother, Rachel was not sure that she could ever accept her mother's new dual existence.

Her mother, however, had no problem accepting that with which she had lived for the majority of her life: she knew the monster by its name—bipolar disorder—and she did not believe its presence was as catastrophic as her two children felt it was. So instead of wasting any time that she spent with her children trying to apologize for what she and the monster had done, Rachel's mother cracked an ill-timed joke and handed her children some foam children's crafts and watercolor paintings. She smiled broadly as she said, "I made these for you two in the group classes. All the crazies have to go. The doctors won't release you if you just stay in your room." She continued, "You two have no idea how much I've missed you. Even though it's only been a week, I feel **so** much better. I think I'm even good enough to go home. It's the doctors being overly cautious. That's why I haven't been released yet."

Turning her attention directly to her daughter, she added tearfully, "I love the poem you gave me. It really has kept me going. I've read it so much that it's already falling apart." She pointed to her chest. "I keep it here, close by. It's almost like I'm close to my doll baby, like you're here with me." She continued without a break or a breath. "Out of everything that's happened, this poem means the most to me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," she said to Rachel as she continued to smile. Rachel looked away until her mother forced her to look back.

Saying, "Feel this," Rachel's mother pointed to the matted ball of hair on the back of her head. As Rachel reached out and grasped the hard, heavy knot of hair, her mother described how this monstrous tangle had occurred. "When I first got here," she said, "I was very dehydrated from being so sick. I could only lie in bed and pray. The doctors didn't bother to give me my regular dose of medicine. They didn't even give me a brush! I just thrashed and thrashed, and this is what happened." Her long, lustrous hair, something Rachel's mother had grown for years and had taken such pride in, would have to be cut short to remove the rat's nest attached to the back of her head.

Rachel's mother talked some more. It seemed as if she could not stop talking, as if her mind were on overdrive. She could not stop smiling, as if her muscles were stuck in a caricature of a grin that showed her slightly yellow, enamel-eroded teeth. Rachel's mother never used to show her teeth. Throughout this encounter, with the smiling and the talking and the

overwhelming feelings of love and despair, Rachel noticed something that she had never noticed about her mother before: she was ceaselessly tapping her foot.

*Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.* On and on it went, and as the visit continued, as she told her kids that she was sure the doctors would release her by the end of the week so she could come to Rachel's ninth grade awards ceremony. Rachel began to draw a connection between that ceaseless tapping and the hyperactivity of her mother's manic mind. Rachel also began to see that the tapping symbolized more than just impatience or a nervous tick—it was a symbol of the monster straining to break free.

After about thirty minutes of the mostly one-sided conversation, Rachel looked at her brother—only two years older than she but someone to whom Rachel always seemed to look to control the situation. He understood Rachel's unspoken message and told their mother that they had to go. Rachel's mother smiled some more. She got up and walked around the table in the visiting room to hug her children. Rachel tried to smile for her, but she could not bring her muscles to muster anything other than a straight line.

Rachel didn't say anything on the way home. She stared out the window as the setting sun added an orange tint to the green blur of rural Texas scenery. As Rachel stared at all that passed by her, as she tried to think coherently, she found that her mind was not up to the challenge. Instead, she seemed only capable of focusing on her mother's face as her mother's features slid through her thoughts like the scenery flashing by the car. She thought about her mother's crooked nose, about their shared hazel eyes and thin lips. Then she considered all the characteristics she could not see, and she began to wonder how much she and her mother were alike within. If they shared their looks, if they shared their genes, then it was possible that they could share something else: if her mother had a monster trapped within her then Rachel realized with rising horror, she possibly could have one deep within her too.

At this dark thought, Rachel turned quickly away from the scenery as dusk slowly swallowed the setting sun. Rachel tried to ease her rising emotions, tried to calm her racing heart, but she could not forget what her mother had said as she looked deep into her daughter's eyes—  
“Funny running into you here.”