

Melanie's Monster



H.N.Henry

Eight-year-old Melanie has a problem. She has a monster.

Every day Melanie's monster fills her with fear and anxiety and makes her tummy ache.

Melanie's monster shows up just about anywhere she goes. At school, it makes her endure teasing on top of fear and shame.

Her parents don't know what to make of Melanie's monster because she refuses to talk about it. "She'll grow out of it," says her mom.

Overhearing a conversation of her parents, Melanie decides to ask for help. In doing so, Melanie meets a new friend who helps her choose the weapons she will need to fight her monster.

Will Melanie find the courage to overcome her fear and face her monster?

To find out, join Melanie on her journey to destroy her monster.

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H. N. Henry



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Huard, Norman Henry
220 B Farmer
Trois-Rivières, Québec, Canada, G9A 3E6
www.hnhenry.com

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Dedication

To all children, young and old,
who daily fight monsters, real and imaginary,
may you find the strength and courage to
tell a person you trust about your monster.

*I learned that courage is not the absence of fear,
but the ability to overcome it.*

—NELSON MANDELA

Melanie's Monster

Downstairs, the kitchen phone rang. The ringer in old red landline that hung on the wall next to the refrigerator was stuck in the loudest position. It woke Melanie. She crawled out of bed and tiptoed partway down the stairs to where she liked to sit when listening in on her parents' conversations.

Melanie couldn't see Dad, but knew he was on the phone because Mom sat at the kitchen table looking and listening. *Who is he talking to?*

“Okay, Jack. So, early tomorrow morning you’ll come to our place? Yes, yes. Sure, you can if you want to. But you could come in to shower,” said Dad. He paused. “Not a problem. I’ll have your clothes ready, a towel and soap and shampoo, and a facecloth.”

Mom was frowning.

Dad spoke again. “That’s great, Jack! You fixed it up, had it checked, and registered it and it’s licensed! You must be happy to have your own vehicle! Okay! Okay! Yeah! We’ll see you tomorrow.” Melanie heard Dad hang the handset on the phone’s cradle and then saw him sit opposite Mom at the table. He wore a big smile.

“Well?” said Mom.

“Nicole, honey, my brother is back! In Jack’s words, he’s slain his monsters and is feeling great! Though he still has issues with the effects of electricity.”

“He has his own car now?”

“That old VW passenger van under the tarp next to the cabin. Étienne said Jack could have it if he could fix it up. Étienne never drove it in the winter, so the body is in great shape. Jack dropped the engine last winter, took it into the cabin and rebuilt it. Étienne, after each time he picked up Jack on his snowmobile, would take him to town in his truck to buy groceries and parts. After helping Étienne at the maple sugar cabin, he fixed the brakes all around and found new used tires for it. Once the road was clear, he brought it in for an inspection. Now it's road worthy, registered and licensed. With a veteran's plate, would you believe!”

Mom reached for Dad's hand. “Richard, that's amazing! Being able to do that is a good sign. Maybe Jack truly has gotten rid of his monsters. He didn't tell us about the van when we visited the sugar cabin in March. Why is he coming here?”

“To buy more art supplies and bring new paintings to Cohen’s Art Gallery.”

“He has more to sell? That means he’s been keeping what he paints and not destroying them!” Mom looked happy as she spoke those words.

“That’s what he says. Remember the six he brought to the gallery?” Mom nodded. “Now, Leonard wants more. Jack’s bringing him 18 more tomorrow!” Mom’s mouth hung open as Dad continued. “Like the first six, they’re not pictures of his monsters. Totally the opposite. No more monsters. He says he burnt the last one in the barrel outside almost eight months ago.”

“That’s great news! If they’re anything like the first six, I can’t wait to see his new ones!”

Dad nodded and said, “If only Melanie could get rid of her monster, we’d all be happy. Especially Melanie!”

“She’ll grow out of it,” said Mom.

That's what she always says. She's not the one with a monster. If Uncle Jack destroyed the monsters he brought back from the war, maybe he could help me destroy mine, thought Melanie, as she held her tummy. She climbed up the stairs and back into bed.

The next morning, when Melanie arrived in the kitchen, Mom was preparing breakfast and Dad was at the door with the items Uncle Jack had asked for. Melanie could see the red and white window van parked in the driveway. Last summer, on their visit to his cabin, Uncle Jack had her make a rubbing with a pastel of what he called “the famous VW logo” on the front of the van. “Where's Uncle Jack?”

Dad opened the door. “He's waiting for me at the garden shower next to the potting shed. He said he'd like to have breakfast with you at our picnic table. Would you like that?”

“Of course!”

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Melanie always wondered about the talk of Uncle Jack's monsters because whenever he saw her, he would brighten up and smile as he talked to her and showed her things, especially how to draw. At those times, he didn't seem to be a man with monsters. *Maybe he's like me. He tries to keep his monsters to himself. But last night, he told Dad he got rid of his monsters.*

It was the last Saturday in April. It would be a good day for Melanie. She wouldn't have to fight her monster at school, only at home. She was in grade two and had been fighting with her monster since starting kindergarten. Now, she had only two more months to go. *Will my monster follow me into grade three? I hate the teasing! Being called Little Miss Dolly Diaper is no fun! It embarrasses me. My monster just makes me worry all the time at school. I'll ask Uncle Jack what he did to destroy his monsters.*

...

Dad came back in. “Honey, we can start breakfast for Jack and Melanie.” Melanie smiled and pushed down the toaster lever. Dad brought out a thermos and poured coffee into it before adding sugar and milk. Mom set sausages in one skillet and butter in another to fry the eggs.

After Mom placed the filled breakfast plates on a tray and covered them with a cloth, Melanie carried it out. Dad followed with the thermos and Melanie’s glass of milk.

Uncle Jack walked over to Melanie, smiling as he reached for the tray. “Hey! Mel! Let me help you with that.” She and Dad followed Jack to the picnic table. “Nice spring day for a picnic breakfast. Thanks for joining me, Mel.”

Dad set the thermos and glass of milk on the table. “Bon appétit! See you later.”

Jack nodded and Melanie said, “Later, Dad.”

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As her uncle set the plates on the table, Melanie couldn't resist asking: "Uncle Jack, how did you get rid of your monsters?" For a moment, Jack lost his smile, and Melanie wondered if she had just made a big mistake, but Jack's smile returned.

"Mel, I'm glad you asked me. It's a long, complicated story about horrific memories from the war that gave me nightmares. Sometimes they still do, but only rarely now. It's a story I'm going to be sharing with other war veterans someday."

Jack reached for Melanie's hand. "But, for you to ask that question, I'm guessing you might have a monster of your own that you're fighting. Am I right?"

Melanie lowered her gaze and took a deep breath before staring at Jack. "I have a monster I'm fighting."

Uncle Jack held up a hand. "Mel, I know how hard it is to talk about our monsters. You don't have to tell me, but if you want to, you can come

with me and meet the person I spoke to about my monsters. She's the one who helped me and gave me the weapons," he paused. "I should say 'tools' to fight my monsters. If you tell her about your monster, you can trust that she'll tell no one, and you can also trust that she'll help you fight your monster."

Melanie held her tummy with both hands. *If I go with Uncle Jack, I'll have to fight my monster away from home. I don't want to embarrass myself. More than anything else, I want to be rid of my monster. If the person who helped my uncle can help me, I shouldn't miss this opportunity. He says I can trust her. I'll try not to worry.* Melanie reached for her fork. "Okay. I'll go with you."

After their breakfast, Jack opened the middle side doors of the van and placed his work boots under the back seat and the folded clothes he had changed out of on the seat.

Melanie counted the paintings that stood upright on a plastic tarp between the back and middle seats. “Nineteen paintings? I heard Dad say you were bringing eighteen.”

“That’s right, Mel. Eighteen for Mr. Cohen, the art dealer. And one for someone special.” Uncle Jack closed the doors, then helped Melanie into the front passenger seat and showed her where to fasten her seat belt. “Let’s go meet Esmeralda. I called her yesterday to let her know I’d show up before she opens her art supply store. She’ll be there to meet us. Oh! Mel, you might be surprised. Esmeralda dresses like a gypsy fortune teller and she has six fingers on her right hand.”

Melanie looked at her own hand. *What side of my hand would an extra finger fit?* “What’s a gypsy fortune teller?”

Uncle Jack scratched his beard. “Hmmm. Well, usually they wear long colorful dresses, a headscarf, and many necklaces, bracelets and rings. And they can tell people about their future

by using special cards or a crystal ball. Don't worry, she doesn't tell people their fortunes, but she can help them if they ask."

Jack parked to the right of the front door of Fournitures d'art Meralda Art Supplies on Main Street. "There she is," said Jack as he waved to the unlocking the shop door from inside.

Esmeralda pushed the door open and stepped outside. Not only was she wearing multiple necklaces, bracelets and rings, but a blue headscarf that matched her long dress. It held up her long black hair streaked with white so that it flowed down over her back and shoulders. She also wore a hip scarf with rows of imitation gold coins linked along one edge.

Jack had Melanie's hand in his. "Esmeralda, I'd like you to meet my niece, Melanie."

The woman's smile grew wider. "Call me 'Meralda'. I'm pleased to meet you. Your uncle

has told me how much he likes you. You're a bright light in his life."

Melanie felt her cheeks redden. "You can call me 'Mel', like my uncle does."

Meralda put her hands on her hips as she looked at Jack's van. "So, this is the vehicle you worked on last winter? It looks almost new."

Jack smiled as he pointed out the windows on the van. "1965, front split windows, 8 skylight windows." He turned to point at Melanie. "How many windows in all?"

Melanie drew an oval in the air as if circling the van. "Twenty-three windows in all. And that's a luggage rack on top at the back."

"Give the young lady a prize!" said Jack as he looked at Meralda. "Would you believe Étienne drove this all the way from California after trading in his old Westfalia, that he camped in when picking apples in the Okanagan Valley in B.C.?"

“Didn’t he pick tobacco in Ontario too?” asked Meralda.

“Yes, and when that was done, he’d drive west to B.C. to pick apples. But with this window van, he became a tour guide and chauffeur in Quebec City in the summers. No more picking for him.”

With concern on her face, Meralda asked, “How are you handling your electromagnetic hypersensitivity?”

Jack pointed to the back of his van. “I had no trouble when I worked on the battery and wiring of this thing. I get no symptoms when driving it, maybe because up front I’m far from the generator, starter, coil and battery. Fluorescent lights seem to be what triggers my headaches. Anyway, up at my cabin, I don’t have to worry about that.”

To Melanie, Uncle Jack’s words sounded like good news for his health. Mom and Dad had explained to her about that rare, complicated

condition. He didn't have it before joining the forces. It started while he was away at war. They hoped that Jack's living in the cabin away from electricity and breathing fresh mountain air would, over time, clean the illness from Jack's system.

They had remarked on how he had gotten physically stronger by working with Étienne on his mountainside forest lots. Together they cut down dead trees with axes and an old "godendart", as Étienne called the big two-man crosscut saw in French. They made firewood for the wood stoves at the sugar cabin and the one at Jack's cabin. They also cut some big pine trees and spruce trees that Étienne would saw into boards and planks.

With his horse, Billy, Étienne liked to haul out the logs they had cut. Once they had cut and split them to firewood length, they would hitch Billy to a sleigh. Then, they would haul some of the wood to stack at the sugar cabin and some next to

the snow-blocked road leading up to Jack's cabin. By then, it would already be time to tap the maples to collect sap to boil into syrup.

The past three years at sugaring time, Melanie had visited the sugar shack with Mom and Dad. They would spend the day collecting sap from buckets hung on the taps of the maple trees. They emptied the pails into the tub on the sleigh that Billy pulled. She enjoyed riding on the sleigh next to Uncle Jack and helping him groom and feed Billy when they were done. Melanie looked forward to the meal they shared at the sugar shack, especially since Étienne, after their meal, always boiled syrup to make maple taffy on the snow for dessert.

Like at Jack's cabin, the sugar shack had no electricity. It had a woodstove to cook on and the big boiler stove to boil the sap. When it got dark, they had oil lamps for light.

Melanie liked those visits and the ones in the summer when they would help Étienne and Jack

truck the firewood corded at the roadside up to the cabin. With the outhouses, she never had to worry about her monster on those trips. Sometimes, secretly, she would imagine living there with Uncle Jack year-round so as not to have to deal with the problems her monster caused her.

Uncle Jack sure seemed to like the simple life, as he called it, with no radio, TV, Internet, or electronic devices. “Like a bird on a wire, I go to bed when the sun goes down and get up when the sun rises,” were words he often said. When not working with Étienne, he would draw and paint and bake bread or beans.

Meralda held out her right hand to Jack’s niece, bringing the girl back to the moment. Melanie had never seen a person with a ring on each finger. “Come with me, Mel. We’ll go inside. Jack, the power’s off. You should have enough light to find your way around. Oh! Do you have that list of canvases you want me to set aside for you?”

“I do! Right here.” He took out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “Melanie has something she needs to talk to you about. I’ll get busy with my list of colors in the acrylic section and have a look at some brushes and pencils to add to my kit. If you need me, that’s where I’ll be.”

Merala nodded and smiled at Melanie. “Mel and I are going to get to know each other.”

As Jack headed down the aisle with an empty basket in hand, Merala led Melanie toward a window alcove on the other side of her store. She pointed to the leather upholstered bench. “I think we’ll be comfortable here.” She sat and motioned for Melanie to sit next to her.

Melanie sat and, to calm down, took a moment to examine the surrounding shelves with all kinds of art books, blank cards with envelopes, pencil cases, and binders. She noticed the woman’s perfume. It reminded her of a mix of fruit,

flowers, and mild spices she could not name. It made her feel at ease. When she finally looked at Meralda, the woman asked, “Mel, how can I help you?”

“Uncle Jack says you helped him. That you gave him the,” she hesitated, “tools to fight his monsters. And last night, I overheard my mom and dad talk about Uncle Jack just after he spoke to Dad on the phone. Dad said his brother was back, that he had,” again she hesitated, “slain his monsters and was feeling great.”

Meralda took Melanie’s hands in hers. “So, Melanie, you’re not feeling great because you have monsters of your own to fight. Am I right?”

“Only one monster.”

“Mel, do you feel comfortable enough to tell me about your monster?”

Melanie lowered her gaze. “I think so.”

“Well, if you can speak about it, chances are I’ll be able to help you.” Meralda looked around her shop and out the window. “We’re alone here.

Your uncle is at the other end of the store. Even so, if you don't want to speak to me out loud, you can whisper in my ear. And if you do, trust that I'll never ever tell anyone about what you tell me. Do you understand?"

Melanie nodded, took a deep breath, and made a sign that she wanted to whisper.

Meralda moved closer and bent so her ear was close to the child's mouth. She listened without saying a word until Melanie finished.

Then, Meralda straightened up and placed her two hands on her knees. Her ringed-fingers seemed to play piano on her knees. Melanie heard her take a deep breath and saw her close her eyes and tilt her head back. Her red lips moved slightly as if speaking silent words.

Then, with a slap of her hands on her knees, she opened her eyes to look at Melanie as the smile on her face grew wider and wider. She held up the sixth finger of her hand, the last one next

to her pinky, the only one with a gold band on it.
“I can help you, Mel!”

She stood up and held out her finger to Melanie. “Come with me. Don’t worry. I’m what doctors call a polydactyl, ‘poly’ as in ‘many’, ‘dactyl’ as in ‘finger’. I’m one of the lucky ones. My extra finger has bones in it, just like all my other fingers. You won’t notice the difference when you hold it. I call it ‘Number Six’. Capital N, capital S, like a real name.”

Melanie smiled as she took hold of Number Six. When she did, Meralda pointed at her with the pointer finger of her left hand. “Mel, do you think you could draw your monster in great detail? As you see it? With all its body parts? With all its colors? Would you be afraid to do that all by yourself?”

“I could do that, yes, all by myself.”
“Good! How big would you like to draw your monster?”

Melanie let go of Number Six and spread her arms. “That wide.”

“How tall?”

Melanie placed a hand just above her belly. “From here to the floor.”

“Very good! Come with me.”

Melanie took hold of Number Six and followed Meralda back along the aisle they had taken. They turned right and crossed another aisle to the shop section with canvases, papers, art boards, sketching pads, frames, and rolls of paper of all colors to her left and right and up and down shelves and sticking out of boxes all around them.

Meralda spoke in a whisper. “Don’t let go of Number Six.” She raised her hand, making Melanie’s follow, and then she turned Melanie in a circle three times. “Take two giant steps backward. Turn to your right. Point down at the third shelf from the bottom. Pull out one of those drawing pads and stand it up.”

Melanie did as she was told. The pad was almost as wide as she had shown, and not quite as tall. It was heavy. Meralda rested Number Six on the edge of the tablet. “For your monster, this is the type of paper you need. I’ll hold the pad for you. Can you read what it says on the cover?”

Melanie took a step back. “Canson Classic Cream Manila Drawing Paper. 24 X 36 inches. Forty Sheets.”

“That’s fine. The pad has forty pages of Manila drawing paper. You’ll only need one for your monster. But your uncle told me how much you like to draw. I’m certain the remaining pages won’t go to waste. Let’s bring the pad to the counter near the cash register at the front.”

Meralda stood next to the counter. She looked around the store before pointing Number Six in Melanie’s direction. “Come with me for the next weapon you need.”

In a new section several rows away, Number Six pointed to each of the wooden boxes on the shelf that contained various kinds and sizes of scissors with their handles sticking out. “I know that you probably already have at least one or more pairs of scissors at home. But, to do away with your monster, you need a pair that has cut nothing yet. Take your time. Try holding different pairs like you would if you were going to cut with them. You want the ones you choose to be easy to open and close because you’ll be doing a lot of cutting.”

Melanie reached for a pair with red plastic finger rings. After slipping her thumb and middle finger through the rings, she pretended to cut with them. The blades pivoted smoothly against each other. *These feel comfortable. I like them.* But she tried others as Meralda had suggested. None of the five others worked as well as the first ones she had tried, so she picked that pair up and tried them again. “I’ll take these.”

“Excellent choice!” said Meralda. She bent to one knee to whisper in Melanie’s ear. When she finished, she stood up and said, “That’s how you must cut up your monster. Understood?”

Melanie looked from the scissors in her hand to Meralda. “Yes, I can do that.”

Meralda smiled, making the creases at the corners of her eyes crinkle. “Good! I was sure you would say that! Now, for a most important weapon, you must choose a new box of crayons to draw your monster. You can only draw your monster with new crayons.”

Melanie stared at the display of crayons in the aisle Meralda had taken her to. “Wax crayons work best on Manila paper. Before you choose a box, think of all the colors you will need. Then, choose the box that has all those colors and more.”

Melanie’s eyes kept darting up to the yellow and green box with the big red number 64 on the front. “Mel, I think your eyes are telling you

which box you should choose. Even if you are only going to use eight to draw your monster, remember, you'll have many more manila pages left to draw on.”

“Yes, I want those!” The box of 64 was just out of Melanie’s reach.

Meralda, with the help of Number Six, placed it in Melanie’s hands. “You won’t need that sharpener on the back of the box.”

Melanie frowned as she looked at the back of the box.

Again, Meralda bent a knee to the floor. “Mel, I want you to listen carefully. When you get home, find an empty container in which to put the crayons that you will use to draw your monster. Once you have chosen them and placed them in that container, I want you to take each crayon and break it in two and peel the paper off each of the pieces.”

Melanie frowned. “Why?”

“When drawing your monster, Mel, you’ll be pressing hard. Sharpened tips just break and the paper on the crayons just gets in the way, especially when shading big parts of your monster.”

Melanie held up a finger. “Like Uncle Jack’s pastels. They don’t have paper on them.”

Meralda smiled. “Right. Also, when you draw your monster, you have to do it all by yourself without help from Mom or Dad or Uncle Jack. It’s very important that you follow all my instructions. Understood?”

“Yes, because if I don’t, I won’t be able to get rid of my monster.”

Meralda stood and smiled at Melanie. “That’s right! Mel, I can tell that you truly want to get rid of your monster.”

Meralda twirled Number Six in the air next to her head. “Now you have to choose two clips and two stout push pins to hold your finished drawing in place. Big and strong pins because, from them,

you'll be hanging the clips that will hold your drawing, and also, one of those clips will hold your scissors! First let me show you the pins I think will work best. Then you'll have an easier time choosing the clips."

This time, in a new section, Number Six pointed to a row of glass jars on a shelf that held push pins of just about any size and any color a person would need. "Which do you suggest, Meralda?"

"Well, big and sturdy would be these." Number Six rested on the rim of the jar as thumb and index reached in to pull one out. "Its head is aluminum. Its pin is pointy and long and strong. Two of them, once pushed into a wall, will hold the clips you choose to hold your drawing and your scissors! What do you think, Mel?"

"Yes! That kind will do. They are longer than my little yellow push pins. But I'll have to ask Mom or Dad to push them into the wall."

“Correct, but you get to choose where on the wall you want the push pins.” Meralda pushed the big pin into the top of Melanie’s crayon box, took another from the jar and pinned it next to its twin. “So we don’t lose them while you choose the clips.”

On the same shelf level in the neighboring section, Number Six pointed to the clips. “The holes have to be big enough to put onto the pinheads.”

Melanie read aloud the words on the cardboard that held the two clips she had chosen. “Bulldog Clips! I think these will work. Let’s try one on a pin.”

Meralda held one pin by its pointy end and pushed the head into the hole of the clip arm. “Perfect fit! Now try hanging your scissors on the clip! Perfect fit again! Excellent choice, Mel!”

“I have two clips, two pins, scissors, crayons, paper. I can find a container at home for the

crayons I choose to color my monster, and I have a small dish I keep in my desk. Meralda, do I need anything else?"

Again, Meralda twirled Number Six in the air beside her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the spinning finger as if listening to it, nodding occasionally. When Number Six stopped, Meralda lowered her arm and removed the gold ring from her extra finger. "Number Six says you can borrow it to wear on the hand you will use to draw and color your monster. The ring will allow you to make one wish come true. Before you draw, close your eyes and make a wish that you will always keep secret. Then, say the magic word out loud only once. The ring will grant your wish."

Without hesitating, Melanie held out her right hand because she already knew what wish she would make. "Please tell me the magic word!"

Meralda bent to slip the ring on Melanie's finger. "I can only whisper it to you once. Repeat it in your mind so you don't forget it."

Meralda's warm whisper carried a word with a magical sound that Melanie loved. In her mind, she repeated it over and over. *It must be magical! I'll never forget it!*

Meralda held a finger to her lips and winked. "Mel, I think you are all set! Let's bring these to the counter at the front and then go find your Uncle Jack. Number Six says you can return the ring on your next visit with your uncle."

Back at the cash register, Jack spilled a basketful of tubes and jars of acrylic paint onto the counter, along with an assortment of brushes and pencils he had chosen. "Put these on my bill. Mel's articles too. And my canvases."

Melanie hugged her uncle. "Thank you! I'll pay you back."

"You already did, with a thank-you hug!"

He looked at Meralda. “Do you have time to cross the street to Cohen’s Art Gallery? The paintings I’m delivering to him are in my van. I’ll show them to you and Mel at the same time.”

Meralda was wrapping Melanie’s items in sheets of newspaper. “I still have 15 minutes before I open shop. You know I want to see your work, Jack. We’ll put Melanie’s supplies in your van. She’ll walk across the street with me. We’ll meet you there.”

Jack parked the van and opened the middle side doors. The paintings were on canvas stretched onto three-foot by four-foot frames. Jack took them out two at a time to lean next to the art dealer’s shop door, where Melanie and Meralda waited. Each painting was of happy children playing simple outdoor games in the streets of a war-torn country. Meralda had tears on her face. “Jack! They are beautiful!”

Jack nodded. “Thanks. Yeah, they’re my beautiful memories. No more monsters to keep me up at night. You were right. I had to paint my monsters that gave me nightmares to be able to confront them. And after I did, I burnt them to destroy them.” He hugged Meralda and smiled at Melanie.

The art dealer stepped outside. “Meralda! Jack! Who do we have here?” He reached out to Melanie. “I’m Mr. Cohen. You can call me ‘Len’. That’s short for Leonard.”

Melanie shook the man’s hand. “I’m Melanie, Jack is my uncle. You can call me ‘Mel’.”

“I’m so happy to meet you, Mel! Jack has told me how much he loves you and how much you mean to him.”

Melanie blushed.

Then Mr. Cohen turned to Jack. “I sold the first six you gave me.” He held up three fingers. “At three times what you asked. I told you—Your

work is valuable!” Mr. Cohen pulled an envelope from his inside jacket pocket. “Your check and the consignment report and receipt for those six.”

Jack opened the envelope, looked at the papers, and then at Mr. Cohen. “Sir, that’s the full amount. You didn’t take your share.”

Mr. Cohen touched Jack’s arm and pointed to the paintings leaning against the wall. “Jack, I’m investing in your work. I’ll take my cut on the sale of these. I’ve never sold an artist’s paintings so easily and so quickly. Your paintings touch the people who see them! Do you have the consignment sheet for those eighteen?”

“Yes, it’s in my van.”

Mr. Cohen turned to Meralda, who was admiring the paintings. “You must be proud of Jack? You started him off on his artistic journey when he was young.”

“I’m amazed by his work. He’s captured their expressions with such sensitivity. Moments of happiness, despite the horrors they’ve lived

through. They are the faces of hope. Hope for a better world.”

Jack handed Mr. Cohen a folder. “Everything is in here. If you can do like the last time, take pictures of each one and the description on the back frame, and email them to my brother.”

“That’s our agreement, Jack. I’ll take the pictures today, plus some of how I display your work.” He reached for one painting and headed back into his art gallery.

Meralda stepped to the edge of the sidewalk. “It’s time for me to open my shop. It’s been nice meeting you, Mel. Jack, I’m so proud of your work.”

Jack held up a hand. “Just a moment. I have something for you.” He took the last painting out of his van and held it for Meralda to see. It was of two boys flying a kite on a hillside. “Remember when you taught me how to draw kites and make

kites? Those were good times. These two boys made me think of you. I painted it for you.”

Meralda’s hands went to her face as she tried to hold back her tears. She wiped her cheeks and said, “Thank you, Jack. You know it means the world to me.” She took it from Jack’s hands and turned to Melanie. “Isn’t it beautiful? Your Uncle Jack is a very talented artist.”

Melanie was smiling. “I love my uncle’s paintings. Especially that one. It tells a story.”

“Mel, if only you knew the story it tells,” said Meralda. “Jack, your supplies will be ready by noon today.”

Jack tapped the envelope in his shirt pocket. “Richard will deposit this and when he and Nicole come to the art gallery, he’ll stop by to pay you.”

Meralda crossed the street to her store.

Melanie offered to hold the door open for Mr. Cohen while he brought Uncle Jack’s paintings in.

“So, Mel, are you ready to fight your monster?” asked Jack.

“I think so. Meralda helped me choose the tools I need, and she gave me instructions.”

“That’s good, Mel. I think you’ll succeed.”

Mr. Cohen came out for the last painting. He shook Jack’s hand. “Thanks, Jack, for bringing these today.” Then he shook Melanie’s. “And thank you, Mel, for your help.”

Jack smiled. “Len, I thank you for believing in me, and for showing and selling my work. Now, more and more, I feel I have goals to work toward.”

Leonard returned his smile. “Keep up your good work, Jack.” He waved to Melanie as he entered his gallery with the last painting in hand.

Jack turned to his niece. “Well, Mel, I think it’s time to take you back home. What do you say?”

Melanie was feeling her monster act up. “I think that’s a good idea.”

...

In the van on the way home, Melanie held her tummy. *Will I make it? Or will I embarrass myself in front of Uncle Jack?* To change her mind, she asked the question that had intrigued her since Meralda had spoken those words to her. “Uncle Jack, remember when I told Meralda that the painting you gave her was especially beautiful because it told a story. What did she mean when she said, if only I knew the story it told?”

Jack glanced at her and took a deep breath before answering. “Meralda taught drawing and painting and even some basic sculpting and pottery making skills at her shop when she first opened it, but only to young people. She only charged enough to cover the cost of the materials. And she taught some of us to make kites and even how to fly them.”

Melanie watched Jack wipe a tear on his cheek before continuing. “Meralda had been in a refugee camp with her parents and two younger

brothers. One day, the boys had snuck out of the camp to go fly their kite on a nearby hill. Unfortunately, one of them stepped on a land mine soldiers hadn't cleared from that hill. It exploded and killed them both."

More tears spilled onto her uncle's face and Melanie felt her eyes tear up.

"Meralda had been watching them play from inside the fence of the compound. It was the last time she saw her brothers alive. She saw them die on that hill, playing with their kite. It was their favorite pastime. That's the memory Meralda has lived with ever since. She says she tries to remember their happy faces before the land mine took them away from her. Teaching kids to draw kites and build and fly them has helped her deal with that memory, her very own monster." Jack swallowed and rubbed the sleeve of his shirt across his cheeks.

Now I know. I feel sorry for Meralda, my new friend.

...

Back home, as soon as Uncle Jack stopped the van and pulled the key from the ignition, Melanie unfastened her seatbelt, opened the door, and climbed out. She ran into the house just in time to deal with her monster. She felt both ashamed and frightened at the same time.

Why do I let this monster scare me? I hate having to do this. I hate the teasing at school. Today I'm going to fight back. My weapons are in the van. Soon as I bring them up to my room, I'm going to get busy.

After emptying and washing the pail she had used to relieve herself, she tore off the rubber gloves and put them with the pail, the brush, and the disinfectant detergent in the cupboard beneath the bathroom sink. *Soon, these things will no longer cause me shame!* As she washed her hands, she looked at the ring on her finger and repeated the magic word in her mind.

...

Mom and Dad were outside with Uncle Jack. Mom held the packet of supplies wrapped in newspaper and Dad held the Manila paper drawing pad. Uncle Jack waved. “Hey, Mel! Come join us! We want your opinion on what to have as a picnic lunch today? I suggest sandwiches with barbequed chips and a big glass of grape juice. You?”

Melanie smiled as she stepped into the driveway. Jack had chosen her favorite kind of weekend lunch. “Me too! If we don’t have barbequed chips, salt and vinegar chips would be good.”

“We have both,” said Mom. “Dad will make a big pitcher of grape juice.”

Melanie reached for the package her mom held. “I have something I want to work on before lunch. Dad, could you bring the pad up for me, please? I don’t want to drop anything on the stairs.”

“Sure, Honey.”

In Melanie's room, Dad set the Manila paper pad on her bed. "Shall I come up to get you when we're ready to eat?"

"No, just holler. I'll come down right away. I promise."

Melanie got to work. *A container for the crayons. I know what I'll use. The small tin of English toffees I got at the gift exchange.* From her dresser, she set it on the floor next to her bed.

Then, like Meralda had whispered in her ear, Melanie took from inside her desk the small porcelain dish. *For the tiny cut pieces of my monster.* It was white and round with blue hand-painted Oriental symbols. She set it next to the toffee tin.

Melanie placed the newspaper-wrapped package and the pad of Manila paper on the floor.

Kneeling, she tore through the layers of newspaper to reveal her other weapons.

First, she placed the pushpins in the small dish and brought it to her desk, along with the scissors and Bulldog clips.

On returning next to her bed, she set the toffee tin and box of crayons on the drawing pad.

Kneeling next to the pad, she opened to box of crayons and chose the colors to draw her monster: red, white, three kinds of green from dark to bright, two kinds of brown, one yellow and one dandelion yellow, and black. *That's ten.* They waited next to the tin while she brought the box of crayons back to her desk.

She could hardly wait to break the crayons. First, she opened the tin, and then one at a time, in the order she had picked them, she broke them in two.

With her fingernails and teeth, she peeled the paper off each piece before dropping it into the toffee tin. She liked the sound the pieces made when striking the metal bottom. *Monster, I'm*

going to draw you. Then I'm going to cut you to pieces to be rid of you!

After she dropped the peeled paper into her wastebasket, Melanie flipped open the cover of her drawing pad and took a moment to think, as Uncle Jack advised her whenever she drew with him at his cabin. “Draw what you really see. Don’t let your brain tell you what you see. Trust your eyes,” he would say.

Melanie’s monster was there, in her mind’s eye, just as she had seen it so many times before when trying to confront it. It filled her with the fear of what it might do to her. But now, she knew what she had to do to stop being afraid.

Melanie took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and made her wish. Then she spoke the magic word: “Shalimar!”

With a nervous smile, she picked up one of the black pieces and drew the outline of the monster with all of its frightening parts—its bloodshot

eyes, its dirty fanged teeth, its clawed fingers and toes, and snotty bulbous snout.

First, she pressed lightly, making sure each part was in place and the right size just as she saw it in her mind.

Then, when satisfied that her monster had taken shape on the page, she pressed hard with the tip of the crayon to go over all the outlines of all the parts.

Melanie sat back on her heels and examined her work. *There you are. I see you now. Soon you won't scare me.* She looked at the worn piece of black crayon in her hand. She had used up more than half of it. *Already I'm feeling better, less afraid.*

She dropped it into the tin and grasped a red one. Pressing hard, she filled in the corners of the monster's mouth and the spaces between its teeth.

From there, she moved to the eyes to press a thin, hard line all around their edges. Setting the red piece on the page, she picked the dandelion

yellow to color the irises of the eyes around their black pupils. Back into the tin went that yellow and out came the white to color the rest of the eyeballs. With that done, she dragged the red over the white, pressing just hard enough to leave some crooked streaks going from the dark red edges to the dandelion yellow irises.

She colored in the fanged-teeth with white and then went over them with the two kinds of brown and some dark green for the smaller ones at the corners of the mouth.

On the tips of the eight biggest fangs, four in the top row and four on the bottom, Melanie pressed the red crayon to make dripping blood stains.

Now your dirty red tongue! She felt her fingers press so hard they hurt, but it felt good, because she knew her preparations to end her monster were moving forward.

She sat back to look at the monster's face. *I forgot the red and brown spots on the tip of your snotty snout.* She bent and added them.

With red in hand, she moved to the claws on the fingers and toes that were already mostly black except for the spaces she had left for the red.

Then she added some red to the monster's black knees and elbows that jutted out to the edges of the page.

Melanie stood with hands on her hips as she looked down at the monster. She smiled. *That's you! I'm almost done!*

Back on her knees, she took a yellow piece, set it on its side and shaded in all the areas where she hadn't colored. In some places, she pressed harder and in some not so hard.

Then, with a different brown in each hand, she pressed their sides over the yellow, pushing off in all directions.

Next, starting with the lightest greens, she went over any yellow areas she hadn't colored

with the browns. With the darker greens, she pressed their tips in streaks, shooting off in all directions, some in short pointy lines, some in longer pointy lines.

She did the same with tips of the black piece she hadn't used.

Finally, she used the brown tips in the same way as the black tips, especially around the monster's belly that hung down between its legs.

Melanie dropped all the crayon pieces back into the tin and pressed its cover in place before setting it to the side of the drawing pad.

She looked at her hands. Flecks of colored wax from her crayons covered the sides of her palms and tips of her fingers.

She clenched the fingers of each hand to form fists, took a deep breath, raised them both and struck the drawing of the monster on the snout.

There! That's what will happen to your snout if I hit it!

At that moment, she felt something inside her. She was feeling good in a special way. *Is that what feeling great feels like?*

“Melanie! Time for lunch!”

“Coming, Dad!” She closed the cover of her drawing pad and brought it to her bed. After picking up the toffee tin and placing it on her desk, she headed downstairs to scrub her hands with the brush at the kitchen sink.

Dad was setting the big pitcher of grape juice on the tray with four empty glasses and two big bowls of chips. Mom was arranging the sandwich triangles on a big plate. She pointed to the four plates with a pile of napkins sitting on the counter. “Melanie, can you bring those to the picnic table?”

She showed her hands. “After I wash these.”

Mom smiled. “Good idea. Looks like you were busy upstairs in your room.”

Melanie stepped on the bottom step of the footstool at the front of the sink. “I’m almost done. Later I’ll need you or Dad to help me. It won’t take long.”

“Okay, Honey. We can do that,” said Dad. “When you’re done, we’ll be with Uncle Jack at the picnic table. Don’t forget the plates and napkins.”

“I won’t.”

Alone in the kitchen, Melanie smiled as she scrubbed her hands. The nylon brush and soap removed all the wax flecks. *Clean.* She reached for the towel, dried her hands, and then left for the picnic table with the plates and napkins.

“Hey, Mel! It’s about time! I’m starving!” said Uncle Jack.

“Don’t start without me.” She set the plates next to Jack, who placed several napkins on each plate before handing them out. Once Melanie sat,

the family reached out to hold hands around the table. “Let us be thankful for the meal we share today,” said Mom.

“We give thanks for the meal we share,” they answered in unison.

After the meal, Jack hugged Mom, Dad, and Melanie. “I’m off to pick up my art supplies. For sure, by tomorrow, Mr. Cohen will have my work on display.”

“First thing tomorrow, we’ll go see your paintings. I can’t wait,” said Mom.

Dad tapped the envelope in his shirt pocket. “I’ll deposit your check in your account and go pay Meralda.”

“Today was a great day for me. Thanks again for everything you do to help me,” said Jack.

“That’s what family’s for,” said Dad as he shook Jack’s hand.

Melanie hugged her uncle and motioned for him to bend so she could whisper in his ear.

“Thanks for helping me. Thanks for taking me with you to meet Merala. I have a new friend. Now, I’m sure I’ll defeat my monster. I love you.”

Jack kissed her cheeks. “I’m sure you will. I love you too. It was a pleasure sharing my chips with a happy Melanie.”

Back in the kitchen, after Melanie put the plates and glasses in the dishwasher, she asked, “Who wants to help me?”

“I do,” said Mom and Dad at the same time.

Melanie nodded. “That’s good. That way, both of you will know.”

Mom and Dad frowned and followed Melanie upstairs to her room. She had been thinking most of the time during the picnic about what she would tell her parents, and even now, as she climbed the stairs, she still wasn’t exactly sure what she would say.

...

In her room, Melanie handed the push pins and scissors to her mom. She gave her dad the clips and then opened the drawing pad on her bed and carefully flipped the drawing of her monster over so she could tear the Manila sheet from the pad.

“Dad, attach the clips to the top of my drawing.”

Without a word, her dad clipped them in place. He and Mom stared at the drawing and then looked at Melanie. She knew they were waiting for her to speak. She picked up the small dish from her desk and pointed at her drawing. “That’s my monster. I drew it and I’m going to destroy it. Come with me.”

They followed Melanie to the upstairs bathroom. She pointed to the wall next to the toilet. “I want to hang my monster right there with the help of,” she pointed to her mom’s hand, “those push pins.”

For a moment, Dad’s mouth hung open. “But Melanie, those are ceramic tiles, and between

them there's grout, a kind of cement. Push pins won't go through that."

Melanie looked from her dad to her mom. "But I have to follow Merala's instructions or else I won't be able to get rid of it." She pointed to the monster drawing her dad held by the clips. She felt an ache in her tummy. *There must be a way.*

"Just a minute, Richard. Are you sure there isn't a way to make holes in the grout?" asked Mom. Dad's lower lip twisted in thought as he bit on it for a moment. Then his finger shot up. "Let me go get what I need." He handed the drawing to Mom and left.

Melanie breathed a sigh of relief. *For a moment, I thought Dad wouldn't let me hang it here.* She smiled at Mom. "I so want to get rid of my monster."

Mom held up the drawing. “So, this is the monster that’s been stopping you from...?” The little finger of her right hand pointed to the toilet.

Melanie swallowed and nodded. “Yes. I’ll explain when Dad comes back.”

Mom smiled and looked down at the drawing. “Even seeing it upside down, it looks very scary. I think I’m beginning to understand your fear. That you drew this monster tells me you’ll be able to get rid of it.”

“Ready to drill holes,” said Dad as he came back into the bathroom with the cordless drill. He pointed to a finishing nail he had inserted into the drill chuck. He pressed the speed control trigger twice. “I set it to medium slow. Mel, where do you want me to drill the holes?”

“Mom, could you hold the drawing against the tiles? I have to be able to reach as high as the clips.”

Her mom held the drawing before Melanie, raised it, and then positioned the clips so the holes lined up with a line of grout between two rows of tiles. “Come see if you can reach this one.” She made space for Melanie.

“Lower it to the next row of tiles. It’ll be easier for me. I won’t have to stand on tiptoes.” Her mom did, and Melanie nodded. “That’s perfect!”

Mom looked to Dad. “Richard, could you make pencil marks on the grout next to the clip holes?”

Dad took the pencil from his shirt pocket and made two little marks on the grout line.

Then, placing the tip of the nail on the pencil mark, he pressed the trigger. As Dad drilled the two holes, Melanie listened to the whirr of the drill as she watched the specks of grout dust fall like snow.

Dad pulled the drill away from the tiles. “I hit the drywall. Mel, give me a pushpin.” Holding the aluminum head, Dad pushed the pin into the hole

and twisted at the same time until the head of the pin was flush with the edges of the tiles on each side of the grout. Melanie gave Dad the other pin. He pushed and twisted it into the hole. “They’re in tight! Ready for the monster picture! Melanie, do you want to hang it or let Mom hang it on the pins?”

“Help me hang it, Mom.” Melanie reached for one clip. Together, they each positioned the hole of their clip arm onto their pushpin’s head. Melanie stepped back and reached for the red-handled scissors on the counter. She fit one of the finger rings over one of the clip arms. “There! I’m ready!”

Then she took the dish from the counter and looked at her parents. “That monster scared me from sitting on the toilet. I was afraid that it would bite my bum. But now, I can fight it so it won’t be able to bite me. Before I sit, I’ll cut a piece of the drawing of the monster. Next, I’ll cut that piece into very tiny pieces and put them in the dish.

Then I'll empty the dish into the toilet. All those little pieces will be like a puzzle to the monster. It won't be able to see clearly past all the pieces unless it can put them together."

Melanie pointed at the toilet. "I'll have time to do my business and then flush that part of the monster away. The monster will chase those pieces to put them together. By the time I finish cutting pieces from the monster drawing, and maybe even before, it will never come back to bite me. It'll be too busy looking for pieces of the picture of itself."

"Wow!" said Dad. "What about the toilets at school?"

"I'll cut tiny pieces and put them in a paper bag to bring to school. That'll make the monster's hunt for picture pieces even more difficult."

Dad was nodding. Mom pointed at the picture and the scissors and then the dish in Melanie's hands. "Honey! This is an amazing plan! There's no way the monster will reassemble all those tiny

pieces! You are going to win your fight with the monster.” She bent and hugged Melanie.

Melanie pointed at her scissors. “They can’t be used to cut anything else until I finish cutting up the monster.”

Dad hugged her. “Don’t worry, Melanie. We won’t touch them. They’re your weapon to fight your monster. We know now that you will win. We’re so proud of you.”

Day after day, toe claw by toe claw, finger claw by finger claw, arm piece by arm piece, leg piece by leg piece, Melanie’s monster, piece by tiny piece, disappeared down the drain along with Melanie’s fear of it. So much so that she had only used the cut pieces of her monster at school a few times. Come June, she decided to take the paper bag with the remaining pieces home.

That first Friday afternoon in June, before packing her school bag to take the bus home,

Melanie took the brown paper bag from inside her desk and placed it on the corner of her desk.

While she turned to take her school bag from the back of her chair, Carl, the class bully, grabbed the paper bag without Melanie noticing. But when she came to place the bag in her schoolbag along with her homework books, she noticed it was no longer where she had placed it. After looking on the floor around her desk, she guesses someone had taken it, and that someone had to be Carl.

The bell rang. Melanie joined her classmates in the lineup to leave. Just by Carl's sly smile, she knew he would tease her outside for the fifteen minutes she had to wait for her bus to arrive.

Sure enough, outside, Carl waved the sandwich-size paper bag in Melanie's face. "What does Little Miss Dolly Diaper have in here? Let's go find out!"

Carl ran to the monkey bars, climbing them with his schoolbag in one hand and the paper bag

in the other. Melanie and those who took the late bus like her followed.

Straddling the top bars, Carl unfolded the paper bag. As he did, he dropped his schoolbag to the ground. Melanie climbed through the cage's bars and picked up Carl's bag. *Maybe there's something inside I can trade for my bag*, she thought as she unzipped the main compartment.

“Leave my bag alone! That’s private property!”

Melanie looked up at him. “And my paper bag is not?” She peeked into his bag and then stuck her hand in.

“Touch anything in my bag. You’ll regret it!”

“Give me back mine. I’ll leave yours alone. Right where it dropped.”

Carl made a fist and waved it. “I warned you.” He opened the paper bag and looked inside, frowning at what he saw, before holding the bag high. “Looks like Little Miss Dolly Diaper is now Little Miss Confetti Queen!” He spilled the

contents of the bag so it would fall on Melanie; but just then, a gust of wind carried the tiny pieces of colored Manila paper up and away, spreading them far and wide across the schoolyard.

As the children around the monkey bars laughed, Melanie couldn't help but smile. *My monster will never ever find all those pieces.* She pulled a blue Grumpy Care Bear from Carl's schoolbag and held it up. "Carl, if only you knew how happy you just made me. I want to give you a big hug to thank you."

Carl's face reddened as he climbed lower and dropped to his feet inside the monkey bar cage. He grabbed the Grumpy Care Bear from Melanie's hands and stuffed it in his schoolbag before climbing out of the monkey bars.

The children standing around chanted: "Care Bear Carl doesn't want a hug!" repeatedly, and louder as he ran away home.

As Melanie emerged from the cage, one of her classmates asked, “Did you make confetti for a wedding?”

Melanie smiled and shook her head. “No. I made it for a private celebration. But I can make more. We better get going or we’ll miss the bus.”

For the rest of the school year, Carl no longer teased Melanie. She never heard the words “Little Miss Dolly Diaper” again; and the only time she had ever heard “Little Miss Confetti Queen” was when Carl had spoken them when on top of the monkey bars. But she did, occasionally, hear a brave kid, from within a group of children when Carl was within shouting distance, call out the words “Care Bear Carl!”.

By the end of the school year, only the monster’s face and one arm remained. Because her monster no longer showed up, Melanie pinned what was left of it, and her scissors, to the corkboard in her room. *Should I keep you as a reminder of my*

victory? I'll decide on the day before school starts. For now, you are my trophy!

And, that summer, to thank Meralda for her help, Melanie, with a little help from Uncle Jack at his cabin, painted her first acrylic picture. It was of a large sled kite on which Meralda, with the help of Number Six, turned in a circle, a smiling Melanie.

†



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Dear Beta Reader,

Thank you for reading the **second beta-reader version** of *Melanie's Monster*. It is 1100 words longer than the first version. I have incorporated most of the pertinent feedback I received from the readers of the first version, which prompted me to add and make some changes of my own.

To benefit future readers, and to help me continue to grow as a writer, I would truly appreciate if you share your honest reaction to this latest version of the story and explain what in the story caused you to react that way.

You can send me your feedback as appreciation, criticism, observations or even suggestions via the **form** you'll find at the link below.

<https://hnhenry.com/home/#contact>

OR you can send your reaction to me via Facebook Messenger.

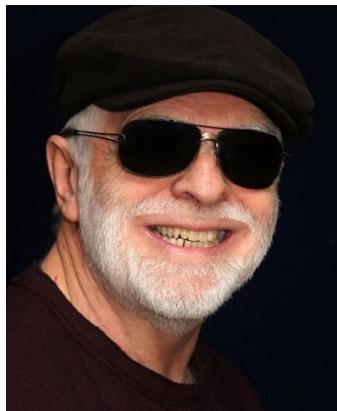
Sincerely,

Huard, Norman Henry (H. N. Henry)

P.S.: If you enjoy reading fantasy fiction books, I have written a series called: *The Dragon's Game*. You can learn more about the six books in the series here:

<https://hnhenry.com/home/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Besides writing, his passions include kayaking, biking, baking bread and learning to play the guitar. He shares the profits from his work with a local community cause, *Point de Rue*. They help homeless people find meaning and passion in their lives. To learn more, click here:

<https://pointderue.com/>

To learn more about the author and his fantasy fiction series, *The Dragon's Game*, please visit his website:

<https://hnhenry.com/home/>

— † —

FROM BANISHED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK I

Legend tells us dragons fly so high they can see the future.

Reason tells us that to know the future is a curse.

Our hearts tell us the seeds of hope are sown in the reality of the present.

— † —

FROM BRANDED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK II

Reality tells us that to lose hope is to welcome death.

— † —

FROM BETRAYED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK III

Hope tells us light lives even in the darkest places.

— † —

FROM BRED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK IV

Darkness tells us it will change us if we venture there.

— † —

FROM BLAMED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK V

Light tells us darkness wraps the gift of fate in the fear of the unknown.

— † —

FROM BLINDED *THE DRAGON'S GAME* BOOK VI

*The curse of fear tells us we are blind
to what we think we see.*

