

MARY A. TURZILLO

MIRANDA'S MONSTER

Fairchild hall looked like a castle, but Miranda Perletier thought the cool echoes and damp stone odor suggested a water-monster's cave. It was September 1968, Buckeye State University, and Miranda was hurrying to teach her very first class.

She twisted the key and streaked her office door open. On the cracked linoleum lay a big envelope. She slid her granny glasses up the bridge of her nose, sleeked her long hair back, and ripped it open. Inside was a drawing in black, black ink: a gravestone, lettered PROFESSOR PERLETIER, R.I.P. 1968.

Chilled, she turned the drawing over. On the back was: SORRY YOU GAVE ME THAT F!
It was signed KANE.

An F? Never! Failing a student was too cruel. She had never even taught a class all her own before. The note must be for a former occupant. She grabbed her gradebook and dashed upstairs.

She had wanted to be a professor since age twelve. Her impractical, intellectual father, who had swept floors at a teacher's college in Iowa, had given his children literary names: Miranda, Dulcinea, Caedmon. From him she got her love of stories, her dreams of inspiring students with the magic of literature.

A crowd waited on the landing. Girls in miniskirts with teased hair and black eye makeup, girls with long, wild hair and daisies painted on their cheeks. Guys bearded, with shaggy manes and bell-bottom jeans belted so low you could see tendrils of pubic hair. A few ROTC types, too, with button-down collars and naked, vulnerable skulls. Her freshmen. Her very first students. Their faces were so trusting. Their minds would be like sponges for her lessons of beauty. She wanted to hug them all.

"Door's locked," said a girl in elephant bell-bottoms.

A wiry old lady in tweed raced up the worn stairs: Dr. Fable. "Not locked. It's those blasted Lilliputians. They did this last year, too." She shook her iron-gray locks like a goddess from Blake's Prophetic Books. Students scrambled out of her way. To Miranda she said, "Get back in line, child."

Miranda wanted to pull her miniskirt down to make it longer. "But Dr. Fable, I'm their teacher."

"Oh." Fable took another look, as if she had missed the brand that said ROOKIE TEACHING ASSISTANT on Miranda's forehead. "Well, get out of the way while I open this damn fool door." Fable kicked the lower hinge and, with a powerful twist, wrenched the door open. "You can't turn your back on it; things get out." She curtsied ironically, and bounded back downstairs, leaving Miranda to wonder

what
things got out of what.

"My roommate said Fairchild Hall has ghosts," said a dainty girl with a big nose and fluffy blonde hair.

Room 203 smelled like paper and erasers. Ancient wooden desks sat in rows, covered with the patina of half a century of human hands, frat house symbols gouged in their surfaces. The room was neat, empty, waiting.

The mural was waiting too.

The colors were deep, the lines sweeping the effect garish. Some art student had done it, years ago. September morning light from the bank of windows made it glow like stained glass.

Ebenezer Scrooge and Titania, Queen of Fairies, melodramatically shared a spotlight, inches from where the Wife of Bath flirted with a degenerate from Confessions of an English Opium Eater. Julius Caesar, Brutus's dagger protruding jauntily from his toga, slumped at the feet of King Arthur. Milton's Satan glared at Othello. Gulliver lay tethered by his own hair while Caliban and David Copperfield gaped at him.

But Miranda had eyes only for the monster. Grendel. The slathering Beowulf beast, lurid green with black saliva dripping from his teeth. Hunchbacked. Eyes red with fury. Claw-like arms (the artist perhaps influenced by the tyrannosaurus rex in Fantasia), menacing an Anglo-Saxon warrior. Miranda could tell the warrior was Anglo-Saxon because of the dragon on his shield.

Miranda quavered, "Students! This is section 101b, and I am Miss Perletier. Here is a syllabus --" Her hands trembled as she handed out dittoed sheets. Students sniffed the still-wet duplicating fluid. "--and a writing assignment for our first day."

Miranda dropped the assignment sheets. A boy with a peace-sign necklace and tie-dyed gauze shirt helped her pick them up.

"Uh, on second thought, it might be dull to write about THE VALUE OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION TO SOCIETY."

"Let's write about the wall painting," said a boy with a bushy beard and angelic blue eyes.

Miranda blinked. "Good idea! Everybody write about Grendel."

Silence. "Who's Grendel?" asked Bushy Beard.

Miranda adored explaining things. She told them the story of Beowulf, acting out the parts. The class period was half over when she realized that it was too late for them to write.

So she let them go early, then went over to introduce herself properly to

Grendel.

"Hello, you 'blaed-fastne feond.'" Nobody was watching, so she closed her eyes and kissed Grendel.

And -- Miranda had always been imaginative -- felt her lips press a leathery cheek, smelling of sea-water.

At the threshold of hearing, fairies tittered. But when she opened her eyes, Titania, Grendel, and the whole mural looked as innocent and flat as when she had first seen them.

Dr. Fable stopped Miranda on the way out of the building. "You've discovered our Grendel," she said. "Perhaps you'll discover yourself in the mural, too."

In her apartment, after her freshmen wrote in class, Miranda was amazed that it took her an hour to grade just one essay.

"Be cool," said Vivianne, her roommate, "and disappear tomorrow. Luigi is crashing here on his way to Oberlin, and we'd dig some privacy."

"But I have papers to grade."

"Bummer. That's what they build libraries for."

Miranda went into the bedroom and brushed her hair, furiously. She didn't want to grade papers in the library.

Vivianne followed her, toying with her love-beads. "I'll do the dishes for a month. Dig it. A whole month."

Miranda pulled yard-long loose hairs out of the brush. "You must really like Luigi."

Vivianne blew a kiss toward the ceiling. "The man is right on. What can I say?"

Miranda sighed. "Okay, I'll grade in my office."

Saturday morning in Indian-summer heat, Miranda climbed the stone steps to the doors of Fairchild Hall. The lock was stiff; the door creaked open like the portal to the mead hall where Beowulf greeted Hrothgar.

She was tempted to go look at the Grendel mural again. But if it took her an hour to do just one paper, a class of thirty was going to take the whole weekend.

So she skipped down the creaky stairs to her office and settled at the old oak desk, glad that her two office mates were elsewhere.

"The Angel-Sexton period of literature is very interesting" began the first paper. Miranda fought an impulse to write BORING, BORING in the margin. Her red pen took on a life of its own, bleeding corrections and advice: TRY FOR MORE VIVID LANGUAGE or I CAN'T FOLLOW YOUR LOGIC.

This was the first set of freshmen papers Miranda had ever graded, so she did not really find them boring. When she looked up, it was almost lunch time. She

swung around in the oak office chair.

A man stood in the office doorway, watching.

How long had he been there? He wore a polyester suit too small for his big frame and a frayed green tie. His eyes were angry, his face unhealthily pale and sweaty.

She swallowed. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Professor Perletier."

"I am Professor Perletier." The title sounded odd, but she tried to look professorial.

"Did you get my note?"

Miranda felt annoyed. "What note?"

The man bent down and fished something out of her wastebasket. "This." He thrust it at her. The sketch of a gravestone.

"Who are you, and why are you snooping through my wastebasket?"

He lowered his head as if his words had some deep meaning. "Kane's the name."

Miranda's stomach flipflopped. Should she call for help? He seemed harmless. He had made a mistake, that was all.

"Mr. Kane, I saw that note, yes, but I just started teaching this semester. I don't know how you even know my name, except that it's on my door. I certainly didn't give you an F."

Kane laughed. "I have the paper here. A fine paper, publishable. Best undergraduate paper you'll ever see. And you failed it. Because it reminded you of your own mediocrity."

"What are you talking about? I never taught you." Miranda stood and put the chair between Kane and her.

"You're stupid." Kane's voice was low, menacing.

"Let me see the paper." Miranda's heart hammered in her chest.

Kane handed her a tattered paper titled "GRENDDEL AND HIS MOTHER: FREUDIAN IMPLICATIONS AND UNSPEAKABLE EVIL." Odd that the topic was like one she had assigned, but she certainly had not graded this paper. She skimmed: in flowery, hysterical language, it accused Grendel of every crime from incest to heroin peddling. A humor piece? No hint of playfulness. The grader's comments, on the last page, suggested that Kane get psychiatric help. Then, a big, red F.

"Look," began Miranda, "here are some papers I've graded. You can see this isn't my penmanship."

Kane took a menacing step into the office. Miranda backed away. "It's your work, bitch, and you're going to pay for it." Kane pulled from his pocket a pair of purple nylon tights. He held a length of one leg taut between his fists.

Miranda edged away. Could she rash by him into the hallway?

A gruff voice bellowed, "Kane, we've warned you about haunting this building. Maybe the police can explain to you about trespassing."

Kane spun around. It was Dr. Fable. Fable grabbed Kane's wrist. "You need another stay at Mercy Pavilion?"

Kane tried to pull away, but Dr. Fable twisted his arm behind him. "Give me this toy." She snatched the purple tights. "God, to what base uses we may come." She turned to Miranda. "'You're the new graduate student I met Wednesday."

Miranda nodded, silent.

"This fellow fancies some woman professor responsible for his state. LSD put worms in his brain that all Freud's minions can't eradicate. But he's afraid of me. Aren't you, humbug?"

Kane looked ashamed to be cowed by someone smaller than he.

"He must have stolen a building key. Upstairs, Wormbrain."

Two young policemen met them at the top of the stair. Like most of her generation, Miranda had mixed feelings about police. But since she had never been arrested, never been in a sit-in, never been gassed, these policemen did not seem like pigs. They seemed like nice men who would remove Kane.

Miranda went back to her office, though her mind was not on her grading. Dr. Fable came back to check on her twice. Both times she nearly shrieked with fright.

"You've nothing to fear from the likes of Kane," said Fable. "You have hidden resources." She tapped her own temple and winked.

The incident faded from memory. Grendel, her beautiful monster, did not. She had her class study Beowulf.

Beowulf was not in the textbook. But Miranda typed a translation on spirit masters and got the secretary to run off copies. The typing was a labor of love.

"Ooo, they'll love the part about wrenching off his arm," she thought, and, "What a lovely speech when the kingless thane steals the dragon's cup!"

To her annoyance, her students vilified Grendel. She felt Grendel had tragic potential: the only character in the epic who had no leader, in a world where masterless men were outcasts. Grendel was a son of darkness, yes. But when revenge was heaped upon revenge, murder on murder, darkness and light were arbitrary.

She was wrong about the epic, her advisor told her. Imposing modern ethical concepts. Anachronism.

Dr. Fable thought otherwise. "You're using your gifts," she said. And the monster in the painting seemed to smile toothily.

One Saturday morning, Miranda arranged to meet David, the young man with granny glasses, concerning his paper.

She had known immediately that the paper was copied. Her heart sank as she read critic. al terms far too advanced for any freshman. "David, David," she keened to herself. "Is this my fault? I've been too demanding and you've felt you had to cheat!" The source was easy to find. David knew enough to copy from the best: "The Monsters and the Critics," by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Finally, Miranda decided David wasn't going to show. "Coward," she muttered as she tugged her jacket on.

Miranda's concern went only skin deep, because she had a date for lunch at the Art Museum.

His name was Dharma Stefaniski, though baptized Kenneth. She was charmed by his handsome red beard and chestnut hair, as well as the tattoo of a rainbow on his left arm. He had a shy lopsided smile, and an enormous record collection: Jefferson Airplane, Ravi Shankar, Iron Butterfly.

She skipped up the old stairs from the basement of Fairchild Hall, anticipating buttered artichokes among the sculptures and the fountains, then a stroll hand-in-hand from Rodin's massive "The Thinker" to the voluptuous "Cupid and Psyche." They would giggle over Cupid's satiated smile, then spend the evening; listening to Dharma's records.

Blocking the door, daylight and cold air streaming into Fairchild Hall from behind him, stood a dark figure.

Kane.

"They gave me drugs." Kane let the door creak closed. "But I didn't forget."

Miranda edged back, planning exit routes. "Forget what?"

"The F on that paper."

"Oh, come on!" Miranda exploded. "You know very well I didn't give you an F on that paper. You got it years ago from some teacher that went on to teach somewhere else."

"No. You gave it to me." Kane ran his finger over the edge of a strange sword she suddenly noticed he had brought.

No, not a sword. The blade, heavy and sharp as a guillotine blade, from the paper-cutter in the English office.

Miranda was scared, but also furious. Dr. Fable said Kane was harmless. The mental hospital had released him. But here he was, with a heavy, sharp weapon.

Not only was he threatening her life, he was making her late to meet Dharma!

"I showed you, that isn't even my handwriting!"

Kane looked uncertain.

"Try to remember the professor's face. Was she young, like me? Did she have long hair, like me?"

He swung the cutter blade, then let it dangle heavily. "I know her name was Perletier."

"What was her first name?"

Kane's brow knit and he peered at her darkly. "Shirley?"

"My name is Miranda! You changed her last name to match mine. But you didn't know her first name. Don't you see? It was the LSD!"

Kane's mouth puckered. He bunched his shoulders and cradled the cutter blade.

Miranda softened her voice. "Bad acid, Kane. That's all. Let me see the paper."

Kane propped the cutter blade against the door frame and produced the crumpled paper.

"This isn't a bad paper at all." Humor him. "Lust needs more focus."

"I flunked out of Buckeye because of that paper." Kane wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Why, I'd give this paper a C plus. Or maybe a B, even."

New hostility flamed in his eyes.

"A B?" he growled. "This is publishable. This is Nobel Laureate work. When you fools are dead and buried, I'll be Professor Emeritus. My genius will blazon forth." He lowered his voice, half menace, half confiding. "I spoke to the President. He didn't answer my letters, so I called him and he said come right over. I flew. He admitted right away that he'd been following the plot."

"The president of the university?" Miranda choked.

Kane's eyes grew round. "No. The President of the United States."

"Oh," Miranda whispered. "Uh, why don't you wait here? I think I remember this Shirley person. I'll call her and --"

Kane grabbed her arm with a paralyzing grip. "I won't hurt you. Just excise the source of the problem." He groped for the cutter blade. "You're right-handed, aren't you?"

Miranda forced herself to relax in his grip, push toward him, then jerk away. He was blocking the main doors, so she ran to the stairs. Dr. Fable's office was on the third floor. Fable came in on Saturdays!

Miranda scurried up the stairs like a frightened squirrel. Kane lumbered heavily after her.

Dr. Fable's office was dark, empty.

She pushed through the double doors to the department library, an echoing room like a medieval chapel. Stairs led upward to a high window. She dashed up them.

Through the wire-meshed glass in the doors, she could see a fire escape. But how did the doors unlock?

Kane bellowed from the second story landing "Perletier! Perletier!"

Miranda leapt back down the stairs, glad she'd worn sneakers. She burst through the double doors again, thinking when he got to the third floor she would push him off balance down the stairs.

He wasn't there. He was waiting on the second floor landing chest heaving. "Goddam hippie!" he snarled.

"Hippie!" Miranda was outraged. She was not a hippie. Hippies did not have jobs. Hippies took drugs every day. Hippies did not wear miniskirts and teach freshman comp. "Hippie! I'm not the one who fried my brains with bad acid!"

Kane lurched up the stairs toward her.

There were two offices besides Fable's. One belonged to Dr. Langland, the medievalist, and the other--

She pounded on Langland's office, but knew before she tried that the ancient prof was not in. No light shone under the door, and Langland was so nearly blind he used the light even at noon.

Miranda pounded on the other door with the flats of her hands.

Then she noticed there was no nameplate on the door.

Empty!

She wrenched the knob. Yes! And unlocked. She darted inside and tripped the lock just as Kane got to the third floor.

A telephone? No, the office was empty except for dusty cardboard boxes of old student themes.

"Pedantic bitch!" howled Kane.

Miranda leaned against the door, jarred by Kane's blows on it. Would it hold?

"An F! A goddam F!" She heard him stumble downstairs again.

Would he give up so easily?

Or was he trying to trick her into coming out?

The window!

Painted shut.

Could she break the window? Then she noticed the fire escape. Oh, no! Kane was planning to climb out a second story window, crawl up the fire escape, and break into the office she was in.

She started to cry. Her bloodied body would be found Monday or Tuesday -- or even later, because who would look in this deserted room?

And not only that,, she was late for her date. Dharma would think she was standing him up!

She laughed, through tears. Kane was going to chop her hand off, and she was worried about missing lunch!

Maybe Kane wouldn't think of the fire escape. But where could he have gone? She peeked down the fire escape. Nothing.

Kane's footsteps up the stairs again. Damn it!

Blows against the door again, more determined now.

The cutter blade! He had gone down to get the blade!

Miranda flew to the window, hammered on it with naked fists, kicked it. She took off her sneaker and pounded it. The frame clattered. The glass wouldn't break!

She looked around, panic knocking at her rib cage. Nothing! No phone, no tools, no weapons, only --

Box.

She grunted with the weight of the cardboard box. Then one, two, HEAVED it through the window. The glass shattered, explosively.

She leaned, out, ignoring glass shards. "I'm being murdered!" Two girls below looked up, consulted, then strolled away.

Miranda hoped they flunked out.

But now she could get to the fire escape.

She pulled out the biggest glass fragments and straddled the window frame.

But the fire escape didn't reach to this window, only as far as Dr. Langland's. And her legs were too short to reach.

At least Kane wouldn't be able to get up that way.

It didn't matter. He had chopped a hole in the door, and now inserted his hand and fumbled for the lock.

Miranda beat at his hand with her sneaker.

He wrenched the sneaker from her.

She backed against the window. She would have to jump. A broken leg was better than being hacked to death.

"HELP ME!" she yelled.

She threw all the power of her being into that yell.

A briny smell wafted to her, and Miranda flashed on a memory: she was on a rocky shore, imagining huge creatures that lived in the deep water. The power of that watery memory spurted into her like a geyser. She must not, would not let Kane kill her.

And then she heard it: someone lumbering up the stairs. Someone bigger than Dr. Fable or Dr. Langland. Bigger even than Kane.

Kane had the lock undone. But the door did not swing open. Instead, he yelled. "No!"

Miranda's whole being echoed, "NO!"

Scuffling. Intake of powerful breath. Choking gurgling. The dank smell, rank and animal.

Crunching like a wooden chair being twisted apart. And a sodden thud, like a melon thrown against the wall.

Miranda trembled, the force of her fear ebbing from her.

Nothing.

"Who's there?" she whispered. The briny smell faded.

Heavy, ursine footsteps downstairs again. Floor boards on the landing creaked. Shuffling, massive weight lumbered down the hall.

Again, nothing.

Miranda felt limp. What was outside that door? The police? Dr. Fable? Wouldn't they have spoken to her?

She crept up to the door, pressed her face to the hole Kane had hacked with his cutter blade.

The cutter blade lay on the floor. A dark rivulet ran toward it, pooled in the hollow worn by the feet of generations of students. Blood? Whose blood?

Nerves singing with fatigue and relief, Miranda unlatched the lock and peeked

out.

Kane lay silent, gazing upward. Above him, gray paneling was smeared with red, as if someone had thrown a painted basketball at the wall. Kane's neck bent strangely, as if he were trying to tuck it under his arm.

"Kane," she spoke softly.

No answer. She watched his chest. It did not move.

"Poor Kane." She retrieved her sneaker.

He lay still as she tiptoed past him down the stairs.

The police insisted that she must have used martial arts training or that Kane must have broken his own skull, spine, and neck in the straggle.

Dharma picked her up from the police station in his VW Bug. "Oh, wow," he said, his face alive with a mixture of concern and relief. "You're all spattered with blood!"

The next Monday, while her students wrote, she graded papers. Her head ached as if from great exertion, and her eyes sought the comfort of the mural.

A tap on the door.

Dr. Fable, smiling mischievously, beckoned. "So what happened?"

Miranda told the whole story. "This sounds foolish," she said, "but I think Grendel saved me."

Fable tsked. "You saved yourself. But if you ever notice a girl that seems to have a certain imaginative glow --- like you -- pass on this secret. The mural is a talisman from which you can summon what you want. You had the energy, and a strong soul."

Miranda smiled foolishly. "Me? My soul isn't very strong."

"The proof's in what happened. Grendel's only a story. But he lives inside you."

"A monster inside me?"

Fable snorted. "A dozen monsters, and a dozen heroines. The mural brings out the gift." Fable glanced inside the classroom, at students who were putting papers on the desk. "If you doubt me, try another character."

Miranda giggled, and for a moment felt her power.

Fable whispered, "I suggest Titania."