

Monster



The last couple times I took my boys to the playground, there was this guy there. He looked harmless, nice even, a baseball cap, jeans, T-shirt. He could have been my age, maybe ten years older or ten years younger—his long, untended beard made it hard to guess. While my boys hit the slides, the swings, and the monkey bars, I'd sit, let them do their thing, on hand in case they fell or decided to wander off. The guy with the long beard, though, he was all in, rotating kids on the little merry-go-round, refereeing games of tag, and playing this game he called "Monster" where he pretended to be a zombie and stalked the kids, who laughed and scattered from his plodding with crazed bliss. He was Dad of the Year, I had to admit, at least until the third time we saw him, the third day in a row, the time he arrived on his bike, executed his all-star routine, then told everyone good-bye and rode off. Mr. Dad of the Year, older-or-younger disheveled me, the king of the playground, didn't have any kids.

My wife didn't think this was strange. Charlene freelanced, writing articles and editing newsletters out of our house. She hadn't been near a slide since our oldest boy, now eight, exited infancy. Playgrounds were my groove, what I did with the boys so she could have an hour or two of quiet. I'm not saying my wife's unperceptive or short-sighted, but I presented this information, she processed it, and her answer was, "Maybe you should play with the boys more, leave your phone in the car?" I don't know where this was coming from, if Charlene had some hidden camera at the playground, but ouch. It wasn't the jab at me that hurt so much as she couldn't see how completely strange it was, a grown man playing with kids at a playground when he didn't have any of his own. For a reasonable comparison, I brought up Chuck E. Cheese, where you absolutely cannot enter unless you have a kid—their way of keeping out the snatchers and pedophiles. Charlene pointed out that Chuck E. Cheese is a private business and the park is public, that this guy had every legal right to be there. "Maybe his kid died or ran away or something, and this is how he heals," Charlene said. "Poor guy is probably in pain."

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I took the boys to a different park the next day. This one was the other side of town, a

playground with a bigger climbing wall, two tornado slides instead of one, an admittedly better attraction serving a higher tax bracket. The boys' eyes almost outgrew their heads, the equipment that much better—they both yelled, “Yay!” as they sprinted into the bowels of recycled milk jugs. Before I sat down, I did a walk-around to make sure there were no hidden hazards, though I doubted this class of people would tolerate such laziness. I'd just about finished my lap when I happened upon this mass, squatting next to a squiggly ladder, counting out loud and covering his eyes. He raised his voice, emphasized, “Twenty!” and sprang upward: It was the guy. A dozen toddlers and tweens had vanished, hiding from this weirdo, who found them all, one by one, pointing and hollering, “Gotcha!” Each child erupted from hiding, feigning disappointment, though it was clear they liked being found, enjoying the fundamental pleasures of the game. By the time the man was counting again, my own boys were scrambling, desperate to find cover. My little one ran right past me, exasperated with nervous joy, and when I grabbed him and told him it was impolite to join a game to which you were not invited, he pulled free, instructing me to let go because I was going to get him caught. I took a step back, heeding that warning as if it were an order, and watched in near-terror as this freak of a non-parent stalked my children. He found one inside a connector tube and the other beneath a ramp, pointing to them and shouting his signature “Gotcha!” as they tittered like idiots.

After they were found a few times, I told the boys we had to go, though we'd driven across town and had been there only twenty minutes. The boys didn't want to leave, especially the youngest, who said he was having the most fun of his entire life. He was five. I reminded him that he'd been to Disneyworld *and* Disneyland, and he replied, “Yeah, but Disney doesn't have Eugene!” and hid himself again. *Eugene*. The creep's name was Eugene, which made sense, as all Eugenes were reprobates of some kind in my experience, which was extensive. I envisioned grabbing the boys and carrying them off, one over each shoulder, when a sudden and intense rainstorm—hail panking the plastic—assaulted the playground, scattering all players. The boys had never seen hail before, so I decided to make our drive home an educational one, explaining how hail happens, the updrafts and whatnot. On our way out of the park, we passed Eugene chugging away on his ten-speed, bouillon-sized pellets pounding his back, head, and face. Both boys chimed that we should pick him up, put his bike on the front rack, and drive him home. Pretending I didn't hear, I pulled out of the park and into traffic. In the rearview, I watched Eugene getting hailed on until I couldn't see him anymore, driving slowly to make the image last.

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Against my instincts, I told Charlene about the guy showing up again, insisting she recognize this as beyond coincidence, as borderline threatening. For a second, I was sure I had her: She said something like, *Across town? Now that is odd*. Then my youngest inserted himself into the conversation, asking, “Is Dad talking about Eugene again?” and Charlene said, “Wait, Eugene? *The Eugene?*” Turned out our little man had been talking about a Eugene for a while—weeks before I'd noticed him—and Charlene had assumed Eugene was an imaginary friend, a phase, albeit a lingerer. I was certain now I had Charlene on my side, that we could together compose our formal complaint to the local police, see that Eugene would at least be banned from the parks. I imagined that once they ran his info, he'd turn out to be the kind of

pederast for whom discovery would mark a return to prison. Instead, Charlene simply said, “Oh, it’s Eugene! You actually had me going there, Cal. It’s Eugene!” I had no idea how this guy’s being Eugene made any of this better, Charlene so at ease. That’s what haunted me the most, I think, this *It’s-just-Eugene!* attitude, lunacy at its purest.

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Before I could make my move against Eugene, I needed to verify he was a criminal and not some gross coincidence who merely liked parks as much as we did. Charlene’s dead-kid theory was also on the table, as were others, Eugene being a Parks Department employee the best of the unlikelies. One more test would do it, so I looked up playgrounds even farther from our house and found one two towns over. The boys, the next morning, seemed suspicious, wondering why they were going to different playgrounds every day, each farther away than the last. I convinced them it was a treat, this variety, and they bought it.

I almost choked, then, when we pulled up to this faraway playland and I spied Eugene, lying on his stomach in the mulchy outer area, calling out, “Ready or not, here I come!” Before I could stop them, my boys sprinted for cover, their first hiding place of the day. I couldn’t believe it, this gross facsimile of me somehow playing at this inconveniently random playground at the same exact time. I had him: The only way Eugene could have been there is if he’d hacked into my history, had seen me scouting parks, and made it here before we did, riding his bike all nineteen miles. The park was so crowded, I didn’t say anything, didn’t call the police, figuring I’d wait until we got home—even Charlene couldn’t deny what was going on. The boys played for forty-five minutes, and then I told them we had to go. Amid protests, I wrenched them from Eugene’s game, belting them firmly into the car for the ride home.

This is when Eugene approached, speaking to me for the first time: “Hey, Cal—*that’s your name, right? Cal?*—can I get a ride back home?” Of all the things he could have asked, this fell just short of “Can I eat your sons for dinner?” as the worst possibility. Something took over me, though, this urge to find out who he was and why he was following us. I said, “Yeah, sure. Let’s get that bike of yours up on the rack.” Eugene thanked me and soon we were on the freeway.

The boys in the back, Eugene in front with me, we made small talk. He asked about my job—I lied and told him I worked for the government, something I couldn’t talk about. He said he was between jobs—I was not surprised. I decided to get to it, demanding that Eugene tell me who he was and why he was following us. He laughed, called me “a card,” but when I asked again, he got defensive, pointing out that he’d been at all the playgrounds *first*, that it was really we who were following him. I told him that playgrounds were for kids and their parents, and he had no right to be there alone, that he was technically trespassing (having no idea if this was true). Eugene said I was the only one who ever complained, that he’d never hurt anyone, how everybody’s kids loved him. I insisted what he was doing was wrong, which prompted him to ask my boys what they thought. When both of my sons told me to leave Eugene alone, that he was like me, but way better, I stopped the car and told him to get out. Without protest, he nodded and asked me to unhook his bike. I exited, careful of passing traffic, and detached the ten-speed from the front rack, just in time to see him in the driver’s seat, putting the car into gear and driving off, leaving me and his bike on the side of the road. My phone was in the car,

as was my wallet. Worst of all, he had my boys.

I rode Eugene's ten-speed to the next town and used a gas station's phone to call the police. A half hour later, a cruiser showed up and drove me to my house. I'd called Charlene and left a voicemail, leaving a few more as we drove. An Amber Alert was out, and the officer driving me home made it sound like every cop in the state was on board—that soon we'd get a call saying they'd found my boys. None came. We drove the rest of the way barely speaking, with me tapping any surface that would make a noise. We finally reached my house, and the cop dropped me and Eugene's bike off outside. I tried the front door: locked. I pounded, expecting a hysterical Charlene to answer. She didn't come. I knocked again, then jogged to the back door and got the same result. Then I noticed the sign, the generic realty sign reading "FOR SALE" in large red letters, my cell phone number etched underneath. I'd been gone four hours.

I rode to the police station and told my story, and at first, the cops were helpful. They'd been working on the Amber Alert and filed all the paperwork they could. But I didn't have any ID. I couldn't prove who I was. I called Charlene from a desk phone, finding her voicemail filled. My parents were dead and so were Charlene's, and since I wasn't working and hadn't made any friends, nobody could vouch for me. I was a ghost. I sensed a shift in the policemen's attitude. Eventually, the station captain emerged from his office and asked me to leave. I was instructed not to return to my house, which they doubted was mine. They called off the Amber Alert. I demanded to see someone higher up, the commissioner, maybe the mayor, and they laughed as they physically removed me from the premises. No other option presenting itself, I hopped on Eugene's bike and drove away. Another cruiser followed me until I reached the city limits, homeless, forced to find my wife and kids by myself.

That's what I've been up to since: looking for my boys. I've searched schools, other police stations, the Internet, but nothing. That left the one place I knew they'd show up, sooner or later: playgrounds. I found a map of them online and rode from one to the next, spending a little time at each, hoping to run into those two familiar faces, laughing and smiling, happy to see me. Before long, I started playing with the kids, games like tag and jump rope and Monster, which, I had to admit, was thrilling. I'd spend whole days sometimes, not leaving a particular park until dusk; other times, I'd play for a while, then ride on to the next site. Sooner or later, I would run into my boys, hug them, kiss them, and, if I was lucky, play with them. Show them everything I'd practiced, everything I'd perfected, the games I'd been playing with other people's children.

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