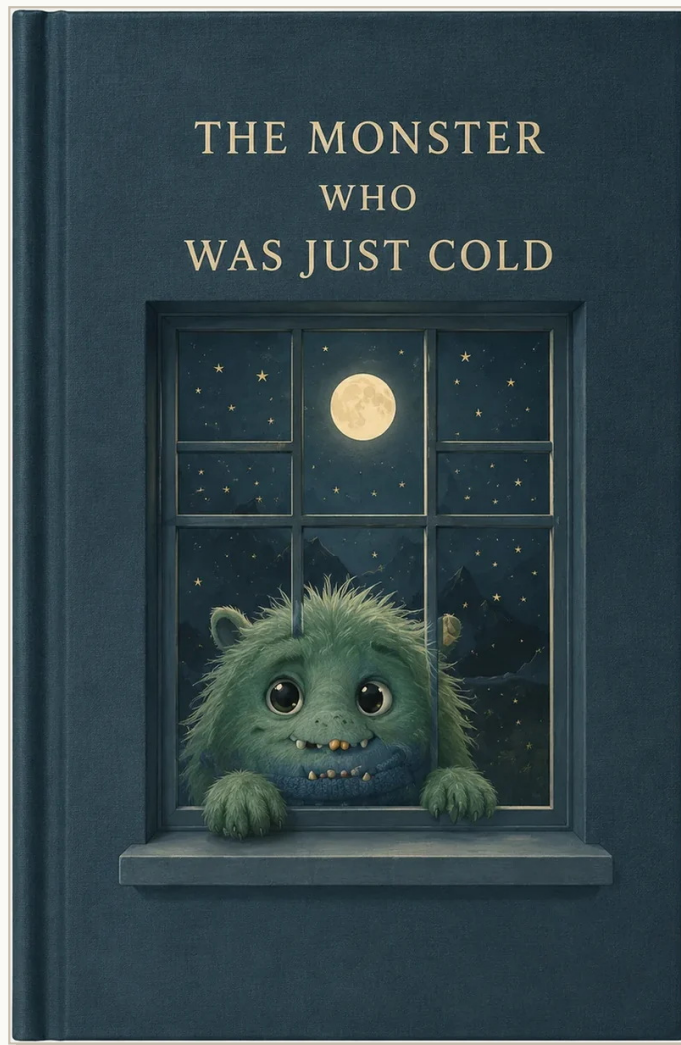


YOUR *Collected* ROOM

AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY



The Monster Who Was Just Cold

A story for the kids' bedroom

The first time Caleb saw the monster, it was standing outside his bedroom window at 2:13 in the morning.

He knew the exact time because his digital clock glowed red beside his bed, and because once you have seen a monster outside your window, checking the time feels like an important thing to do.

2:13.

The monster was tall enough that Caleb could only see it from the shoulders up.

It had two dark eyes.

A wide head.

And something that might have been fur, except the glass was fogged around the edges and the moonlight made everything outside look flatter and stranger than it really was.

Caleb did not scream.

This was not because he was brave.

It was because his scream seemed to have gotten stuck somewhere near his stomach.

The monster lifted one enormous hand.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Caleb pulled the blanket over his head.

He stayed there for a long time.

When he finally looked again, the window was empty.



In the morning, Caleb told no one.

There were some things that sounded ridiculous the second they were spoken aloud.

A monster outside your bedroom window was one of them.

Besides, it was December. A branch could have tapped the glass. A shadow could have looked like a face. Caleb was eleven years old and understood perfectly well how darkness could rearrange ordinary things.

Then he found the footprints.

They began beneath his window and crossed the thin layer of frost on the lawn.

Each one was nearly twice the size of his father's shoe.

Caleb followed them past the birdbath, around the oak tree, and toward the wooden fence at the back of the yard.

There, they stopped.

Not faded.

Stopped.

Caleb stared at the empty patch of frost beyond the last footprint.

“Well, that’s strange,” he whispered.



That afternoon, Caleb went down to the basement to look for a flashlight. If the monster came back, he wanted to see exactly what was standing outside his window.

While searching through a shelf of old camping gear, he noticed a small wooden box tucked behind a stack of board games.

It was made of dark wood, with a silver latch and the carved shape of a flame on its lid.

Caleb pulled it from the shelf and opened it.

Inside was an object about the size of an egg, resting in one half of the faded velvet lining.

Beside it was a second indentation—a small, empty circle with a narrow groove extending from the top, as though something on a cord had once rested there.

Whatever it had held was gone.

Caleb picked up the egg-shaped object.

It looked like a smooth black stone, although it was much lighter than a stone should have been. A thin silver line ran around its middle.

As soon as Caleb held it, the stone became warm.

Not slightly warm.

Fireplace warm.

He nearly dropped it.

Then a tiny click came from inside.

The silver line began to glow.

Caleb turned it over.

Words were scratched into the bottom.

KEEP NEAR THE COLD.

That was all.

No instructions.

No explanation.

Caleb's family had lived in the house for only two years, and most of what the previous owners had left behind consisted of bent curtain rods and mysterious screws.

A warm black stone was considerably more interesting.

Caleb carried the box upstairs.



That night, he placed the stone on his windowsill.

At 2:13, he woke to tapping.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The monster was back.

This time Caleb saw it clearly.

It was enormous.

Its fur was gray and tangled and covered with tiny crystals of ice.

Two pointed ears rose from its head. Its nose was broad and black.

And its eyes were not frightening.

They were tired.

The monster pressed both hands against the glass.

It was shivering so hard its teeth clicked together.

The stone gave a tiny click.

Its silver line began to glow.

The monster looked at it.

Then at Caleb.

Then back at the stone.

Caleb opened the window three inches.

Freezing air rushed into the room.

The monster leaned closer.

Up close, it was even bigger. It smelled like pine trees, snow, and something vaguely unpleasant.

Wet socks, perhaps.

The monster pointed at the stone.

“You want this?”

The monster nodded.

Caleb held it toward the open window.

The monster reached for it carefully.

The moment one enormous finger touched the stone, the silver line flashed gold.

The monster went still.

The ice caught in the fur around its face began to melt. Its shoulders stopped shaking. It closed its eyes and let out a long, low sigh.

“Warm,” it whispered.

Caleb watched a drop of water slide from the monster’s pointed ear.

“You were just cold,” he said.

The monster opened its eyes.

“Cold,” it agreed.

For another moment, it kept one hand against the stone. Then it wrapped its fingers around it and lifted it from Caleb’s palm.

The gold light disappeared.

Frost raced across the stone.

The monster stopped.

It opened its hand.

The stone was covered in white ice.

But the monster was still warm. Its fur was damp now instead of frozen, and it was no longer shivering.

Caleb reached out and took the stone.

The instant it settled into his hands—

Click.

The frost melted.

The silver line glowed gold again.

Caleb frowned.

He handed it back.

Frost.

The monster handed it to Caleb.

Click.

Gold.

They tried once more.

Same thing.

The monster stared at the stone in Caleb's hands.

Then it looked toward the woods.

“More,” it said.

“More monsters?”

The monster nodded.

“Cold.”

Caleb looked down at the glowing stone.

“You want to take this to them?”

The monster reached for it.

Before it had even lifted the stone completely from Caleb’s palm, frost appeared along one edge.

The monster pulled its hand away.

It looked at Caleb.

Then at the stone.

“You carry.”

Caleb blinked.

The monster pointed toward the woods.

“You come.”

Caleb looked at the dark trees beyond the yard.

Then at his clock.

2:27.

“Not now.”

The monster tilted its head.

“Tomorrow,” Caleb said. “When it’s light.”

The monster considered this.

Then it nodded.

“Tomorrow.”



By morning, the monster was gone.

But its footprints weren't.

They crossed the frosted lawn in the same enormous steps Caleb had seen the day before. Past the birdbath. Around the oak tree. Straight toward the wooden fence.

Caleb followed, the black stone warm inside his coat pocket.

At the fence, the footprints stopped.

Again.

Caleb stared at them.

Then he noticed something he hadn't noticed yesterday.

One of the fence boards was loose.

He pushed it.

The board swung inward just enough for him to squeeze through.

On the other side, the footprints continued.

Across the frozen grass.

Toward the woods.

“Oh,” Caleb said.

The monster hadn’t disappeared at all.

Caleb followed the tracks between the bare trees.

Soon, something moved ahead.

The monster stepped into view.

It looked at Caleb.

Then at the pocket where Caleb carried the stone.

“You came.”

“I said I would.”

The monster turned toward the deeper woods.

“Come.”

And this time, Caleb followed.

The footprints led over a frozen creek and into a clearing Caleb had never seen before.

At its center stood what looked like the remains of a small stone chimney.

Around it were circles of black rock, broken pieces of silver metal, and patches of frost that seemed thicker than the frost anywhere else.

Then Caleb saw the others.

Eleven more monsters stood among the trees.

Some were tall.

Some were short.

One had enormous ears.

Another appeared to be almost entirely beard.

All of them were shivering.

Caleb took the black stone from his pocket.

Click.

The silver line glowed.

Every monster looked at it.

In the center of the ruined chimney was a round hollow.

Caleb stepped closer.

The stone in his hand grew warmer.

He looked at the hollow.

Then at the stone.

They were exactly the same size.

“Oh,” Caleb said.

The large monster nodded.

Caleb placed the stone into the hollow.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then—

WHOOMPH.

Golden light rushed through the broken silver pieces around the clearing.

One by one, the black rocks began to glow.

Warmth rolled outward.

The frost vanished.

All twelve monsters sighed at once.

It sounded like wind moving through a tunnel.

One monster immediately lay down beside the warm stones.

Another stretched out so close that steam began rising from its fur.

The smallest did a little dance.

Caleb laughed.

The large monster sat beside him.

“Warm,” it said.

“Yeah,” Caleb said. “Warm.”

Before Caleb left, the monster reached beneath the thick fur around its neck.

It pulled out a small brass compass on a worn leather cord.

The monster placed it in Caleb’s hand.

Caleb stared at it.

Something about its shape seemed familiar.

“For me?”

The monster nodded.

Caleb opened the compass.

The needle spun slowly.

It passed north.

Then stopped.

It was pointing directly at the monster.

“That’s not north,” Caleb said.

The monster smiled.

“Works.”

Caleb laughed.

This time, he believed him.

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That evening, Caleb went to the wooden box.

He opened it.

The black stone’s place was empty now.

Beside it was the other indentation—the small circle with the narrow groove above it.

Caleb laid the compass inside.

It fit perfectly.

There was a soft click.

Caleb froze.

Words had appeared inside the lid.

FOR FINDING YOUR WAY BACK.

Caleb looked at the compass.

Then toward his bedroom window.

Beyond it, the woods were dark and quiet.

Somewhere out there, twelve monsters were warm.

Caleb closed the box.

The End

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