



The Box Man

Kali Rawat

30 years ago.

He is here again. He is here every night. He always sits in the same place, in the same pose. He is immobile, still, statue-like. He is like a huge toad, obese, bald and repulsive in his posture, legs splayed, meaty hands on his knees. I cannot make out much of him; I don't know the color of his eyes, or his skin. I cannot see his garments. He is a black, solid shape, hunched over his protuberant belly, crouching near my feet. He loves to taunt me; he is taunting me now. Taunting me that he will grab my toes with his thick, strong fingers, and pull me off my bed.

He sits silently on top of my beloved toy chest at the foot of my bed. Hand painted in shades of lavender and white, it is the picture

of girlish naiveté. But he sits on it every night, soiling it with his fetid odour. Patient, almost like a loyal pet waiting for his master to awaken, he is quiet, meditative even as he waits for my sleep to break. But his eyes, those ugly, bulbous eyes dart all around my bedroom; He is waiting, waiting for me to wake up.

I can sense his presence even before I fully awaken. The awareness of him is physical. It starts with a tickling near my earlobe, like someone is breathing in my ear, and then the hairs on my neck and arms begin to stand. I know he is there then, willing me to open my eyes.

The minute I awake, his eyes fixate on me. They halt their relentless scan of the room and lock onto my sleepy pupils. I am frozen as my all too familiar dread solidifies into a lump in my stomach. I shiver uncontrollably.

And then he begins to laugh.

His laugh is loud, mocking, and not kind. He laughs with his body, his shoulders vibrating under his apparent mirth and my palpable terror. He laughs like this continuously till I scream out of fear and jolt upright on my bed. Satisfied with waking me, he stops laughing and stares at me, forcing eye contact. I cower under the covers praying for him to go away. In my childish innocence, I call him the Box Man.

I scream loudly, tears streaming down my face calling for my Ma, my savior, fearless banisher of all demons to come and save me. And she does, she rushes into my room as she does on so many nights, her tired face full of concern, but also helplessness. For how can any savior vanquish a demon when they can't see him?

“There he is, right there!” I sob pointing trembling fingers at him. He is very aware of the adult in the room, but supremely confident that he will not be ousted from his seat. The adult simply cannot see him. He revels in this knowledge, starting to giggle again, making me squeeze my palms across my ears trying to drown out the sound.

I have told you about him, Ma. I have woken you up, drenched in sweat screaming in terror as he revels in my fear. I have even pointed him out to you as he shook with laughter watching you unable to comprehend your child's fear. But you couldn't see him with your adult eyes. Your calm, logical mind could never fathom the black depths of fear that he would drag me to night after night.

You are anxious but not worried, as aren't childish dreams of monsters part and parcel of a precocious seven-year old's growing up? You soothe me, give me a glass of water and lay down with me till my breathing regularizes and I sink back into an exhausted half sleep.

I know nobody will understand me; my seven-year-old mind knows with a certainty that only children have, that he will never go away. I have tried everything to avoid him. I have tried not sleeping altogether for a few nights, but in the end, the lure of sleep is too powerful, and I end up dozing off into a troubled sleep, borne of fatigue- but full of trepidation. He knows this. And this is when he comes to my room. I can sense him in my subconscious even before I am fully awake. He is an indelible part of my childhood.

Present Day

It has been 30 years since I saw him last. Years of therapy with child psychologists who offered a bouquet of explanations and solutions to my parents, from PTSD to an over active imagination, to stress at school. I am unsure of which approach worked, but the Box Man stopped visiting me when we moved out of our home. My parents and I relocated to Mumbai, to a bright and sunny apartment with no dark corners and menacing Box Men. I never saw the Box Man in my adult life again, he disappeared without a trace and I forgot all about him.

A lot happened in these past 30 years, I found a job, fell in love and got married. We relocated to the Himalayas where we lived in a small but comfortable home, surrounded by towering pines and cedar trees. It was a remote cottage, and though sometimes the isolation could be a bit daunting, we enjoyed the pure air and living

off the land. I took up growing my own vegetables and fruits. Our other supplies we procured from the little market several hour's drive away, through the twisting and narrow hill roads. Our little family grew, and I had a baby daughter four years ago. We lived in total bliss, every day wrapped up in the joys of becoming parents for the first time and discovering a love for our child which was like none other. Having no neighbors close by, we kept to ourselves, enjoying the privacy and reprieve from city life.

Life was fairly idyllic in our isolated home till I got a phone call from my mother last week saying that my childhood home had burnt down, with a request to visit the home and bring back whatever was salvageable. Ma was old now, and though she would have liked to see her old home and sort out her things, she was not up to the arduous task. Her request though valid annoyed me. Pregnant with my second child, the last thing I wanted to do was travel halfway across the country, especially as my husband was soon due for a long work trip of his own. It also surprised me that the house had burned down, as it had been lying vacant for many years now. How was that even possible? Did some vagrants or miscreants make it their home? If that was the scenario, then I certainly didn't want to be the one to discover their hideout! My husband offered to go and look at the house himself, but I felt it was important for me to say goodbye to my home one last time. I booked a flight out within the next few days.

As I stood before my charred home, I found it unrecognizable, the fire had burned away most of the pretty façade. As I entered the house the stench of smoke assailed my nostrils. Everything was covered in soot, pitch black and twisted like grotesque black serpents dragged in from the sea. The air conditioners hung like ugly melted chandeliers off the walls and the glass windows looked out like sightless black eyes into the bright sunlight outside. Each and every room bore the marks of this devastation. There was not much to salvage; the fire had taken it all. I took a few pictures on my cellphone for the insurance claims and also to show my parents the damage that had been done. One thing is for sure, the house was

now ugly. I didn't feel anything for this home, I think I should have, but I could shed no tears for it. It was bricks and mortar, melted iron and plastic and not much more to me.

I entered my bedroom last, dreading to see the destruction wrought there and indeed, the room too was unrecognizable. Depressed, I turned to leave but then it caught my eye! My old toy chest, miraculously unscathed, intact with its colors still fresh as though recently painted. How did it manage to survive the fire? I wondered. Could it be the varnish that was fire retardant? It was a huge, heavy toy chest, short but solid. I had forgotten how large it was! I was overjoyed to see it, it held many a childhood toys and happy memories within it. Aside from this, there was a steel cupboard and a few odds and ends that had survived. I quickly arranged to have them lifted and transported to my Himalayan home. I never did send the photographs of our home, sad as they were to my parents, I wanted them to remember it the way it was in its prime, untouched and innocent.

My husband left for his work trip the day I returned and I resumed my routine like I had never left. My day was filled up with my darling daughter and her needs, and the little time I had left over, I spent in redecorating the spare bedroom as a children's play room. My childhood toy chest occupied pride of place there, this time underneath the window.

A few days after I returned, I started sensing something awry in me. Like a tiny blip on a radar, something would niggle at the very edges of my thoughts, but I just couldn't catch it. Attributing it to my schedule with my four-year-old and an advancing pregnancy I let it go. But time would slip past me, I would start a task only to find myself wandering aimlessly around the house. Very often I would find myself sitting on the rocking chair in the spare bedroom, daydreaming about nothing at all. I missed my husband, he was away on a long trip this time, thinking that he would take an extended leave after the baby was born.

But it was monsoon season in the hills and the heavy rain would often bring landslides and torrents of water gushing down the hills creating a somber and heavy mood. Thick mist would obscure the sun for days and cling to the hills like cotton saturated with sugar syrup. My thoughts felt like that too, slow, sticky and dull. I knew I had a lot of things to complete before the baby came, but couldn't muster up the energy to do anything except care for my daughter. I decided that I was too paranoid about my dulling faculties and the horrible weather was making it worse, and chose to ignore my sixth sense that something was WRONG.

I only realized what a folly that was the night the Box Man returned. I was sleeping a restless sleep, swollen feet propped on a pillow when the all too familiar tickling near my earlobe began. Soon the hair on my arms and neck stood. It was like the 30 years that had elapsed melted away. I knew from the first sensation, that he was back. How could this be? I thought to myself. Why now? But those thoughts were quickly replaced by the all too familiar dread that began gnawing a hole in my stomach.

I chided myself, on being an adult, a mother and fearing my childhood monster! I screwed my eyes shut, silently praying that the laughter, that dreaded laughter would not fill my ears again. I opened my eyes to glance around my room and that's when I saw him. His huge heft was standing partially hidden behind the curtain, peeking out at me like we were in some grotesque version of hide and seek. His hairy hands clutched the curtain fabric as he craned his bloodshot eyes towards me and made eye contact.

He began to laugh. Silent at first and then louder, louder. Rooted to my bed, I broke out in a cold sweat unable to tear my eyes away from his. He fed on my obvious terror and threw his head back laughing only to snap back and keep his eyes glued onto mine. Minutes elapsed and it seemed that even the full moon, previously hidden behind ominous clouds conspired against me, shining through my window and illuminating him in a way that a spotlight would.

I tried to run, but terror paralyzed me, my limbs like heavy lead. Unable to bear his laughter anymore I screamed and covered my ears with my hands, knowing that this was exactly what he wanted. The last thing I remembered was opening my eyes to find him right next to me, his hairy hands no longer clutching the curtain but my t shirt.

I don't remember much of what happened after that, except that the next few nights went on in a similar manner, till I started having a cautionary cup of coffee to delay bedtime. But coffee and pregnancy don't mix and I knew deep down that this was not the solution. Determined to put an end to his visits, I skipped the coffee and fell into a restless sleep, steeling myself for yet another petrifying encounter.

And petrifying it was. This night he seemed larger, more substantial and even more menacing. He was not content to stare at me from a distance, I sensed he wanted more. Cowering in my bed with my hands trembling against my ears I thought "You have to stop this. You are no longer seven years old, you're a mother. Put an end to it. Don't let him feed off your fear". I recalled my childhood therapy sessions and tried to confront my fear with calm and logic. Resisting the urge to clamp my eyes shut with my hands, I lay back down on my bed deliberately with a show of nonchalance that I didn't really feel. I turned my back to him and feigned utter indifference and sleep. His laughter stuttered at first, and then roared through my bedroom, loud and enraged but I refused to rise to the bait. I sensed him approach my bed and knew that he was willing me to open my eyes or hide under the covers but I did nothing of the sort. It was one of the most difficult things I had to do; pretend to be sleeping when I knew that he was right at my bedside glaring down at me. But it worked.

I don't know when he left me and I don't remember when I fell asleep, but I did and awoke the next morning feeling refreshed and full of renewed purpose and vigor. I had closed a terrible chapter in my life and was excited to tell my husband all about it when he

returned. How would I know that this was not the end but just a new beginning?

My husband called the next day, and I was full of beans, excited to tell him about all that had transpired in the past few weeks. I was embarrassed to talk about the Box Man, and more than a bit annoyed when he laughed off my fears. Seeing his casual take on my very real fear, I became aggressive and raised my tone, trying to convince him that what I felt was real, what I saw was real, but somewhere I knew this was a lost cause. After all, 30 years ago when I tried to show Ma the Box Man, didn't the same thing happen? She couldn't see him, couldn't believe in the concept of him. He was mine and mine alone.

Eager to change the topic, I sent him pictures of the burnt house and the remnants of the fire that I had managed to salvage. I described to him at length the nature of the damage, even to the structural beams of the house. To my utter annoyance, he was hell bent on contradicting me that day! He refuted my claims of the house looking beyond repair and kept insisting that it was "in pretty good condition" despite the fire. I was impatient with his baiting me for God knows what reason, and sent him the picture of my old toy chest, glimmering and pristine among the ruins. He contradicted me again, wondering why I brought that obviously damaged piece of junk back home. What? Were we looking at the same image? Why was he contradicting me? I explained to him that maybe he is unable to view it correctly, and that it was in mint condition, but he insisted that it was charred badly and not fit to keep in the children's playroom. He said that he would have someone remove it upon his return, it was way too heavy for me to move and the inclement weather outside made it impossible for anyone from the village 5 kilometers away to come and help me.

Feeling thoroughly disappointed with our conversation, I hung up the phone abruptly and went into the playroom to look at the toy chest again. There it was clean and shining, its lavender flowers like new! I ran my fingers across its glossy surface. I couldn't understand it! Why was my husband doing this? Was there

something wrong with him, or me? I was confused, and irritated. How could the both of us have such different opinions about the house and the toy chest? I was pregnant, not stupid! I went about the day with an unsettling mix of anger and frustration brewing in my mind, all the joy of vanquishing the Box Man dissipated. Relieved when night finally came, I crashed into a heavy and dreamless sleep, on the edges of my subconscious, a voice telling me that something is not quite how it should be.

I awoke late at night to my daughter screams, terror filled echoes that I knew all too well. I rushed to the playroom to find her sitting up in her bed pointing sightlessly to my treasured toy chest screaming “there is a man sitting there, right there” her curls matted to her forehead with cold sweat. “What man?” I asked her, though my gut screamed “he’s come back!”

“The fat man, Mama, sitting on the toy chest”, she screamed, eyes wide with terror, her tiny body shivering with a clammy sweat. I turned to face my nemesis, confident of defeating him. I had done it before; I could do it again! But this time I couldn’t see him! I desperately asked my daughter to point him out to me again, and she pointed to the wooden toy chest... “There! Sitting on the chest” she wailed “He is laughing at me, Mama”.

No! Not my daughter! Despondency crashed through me, the realization dawning on me that I hadn’t really defeated the box man, only redirected his malice towards my daughter. Try as I might, I could not see him or hear him, and that puzzled me, terrified me. I had to get her out of this room! The rain beating a terrifying tattoo against the windows and the wind howling through the doorways, I scooped her up in my arms and carried her to my bed. Shutting the door tight, I placed her on my bed, where she slept peacefully while I tore myself apart over the implications of my situation. The worst part of it was, I didn’t know what was real and what was not any more.

Morning finally dawned and I realized I was in over my head. I left my daughter sleeping a deep sleep on my bed and tiptoed out of the

room to call my husband to ask him to cut short his trip and return. Perhaps feeling guilty about his behavior yesterday, he agreed to try and reschedule. Relieved, I went to the kitchen to see about making some breakfast. After a good breakfast and strong coffee in me I felt foolish about asking my husband to return early because of some nightmares and resolving to be more brave I went in search of my daughter, to see if she was ready for breakfast.

She was not in my bed, so calling out to her I checked in the bathroom. Not there. I went on to the playroom hoping to find her tangled in her bedsheets in her bed but she was not there either. Fighting the rising panic in my voice I ran from room to room looking for her, in closets, behind curtains, underneath the beds, but it was a small house, and SHE WAS NOT THERE.

Panic overwhelmed every pore of me. My knees turned to jelly and my stomach churned. Clutching my belly, I screamed her name again and again, unable to comprehend the daytime nightmare I seemed to be trapped in. I ran outside my house, to see if she was in the small garden but it was empty. Sheets of rain poured outside and visibility was basically nil. All I could see was a wall of white water. Still, I stumbled blindly in the rain calling out her name, my tears mingling with the icily relentless rain beating down my back. There was no answer. I checked around the periphery of the house, knowing all too well that she wouldn't be there; we lived on a hillside, so she knew better than to wander off alone, in fact she was often frightened of being alone. Coming back inside, I slumped heavily on the sofa, head in my hands, trying to control my shaking and forcing my mind to some sense or order. "Think, think" I repeated like a mantra. But only one crazy thought came crashing through again and again. HE had taken her. The Box Man had now progressed beyond my subconscious; a simple childhood nightmare into something more solid, more threatening.

How was that possible, He was not real was he? He could torment my thoughts but how could he take my child? I sobbed thinking of how frightened she would be, calling out for her mother. I felt helpless and petrified to my core. Where was my baby? What do I

do now? I decided to follow logic, to not let my mind control me and went once more to her room to look for some clues to her whereabouts; did she take her raincoat with her? Was she wearing her gumboots? Her raincoat was just where she had left it, her boots tossed casually near the window. And that's when I saw it. Glowing prettily under the sunrays coming in through the window was the toy chest, HIS nightly seat. Did I invite the box man back into our lives through this toy chest? I threw aside the toys piled on top of it and opened it.

There was my darling nestled inside, fast asleep without a care in the world. Sobbing with relief I lifted her out of the box, thanking God that I found her, vowing to never let her out of my sight again. My baby, how close I had come to losing her! How did she get in there? What if she had suffocated? The box lid was so heavy; how did she lift it? And why did she crawl into that space? My tears falling on her little face woke up my darling and she smiled up at me. "Mama why are you crying?" she asked. Her question broke my heart. "Why darling, why were you in the box?" I asked her. "He told me to" she replied matter of factly. "He said he will not trouble us any more if I come and sleep inside the toy chest, so I guess I did!"

What? He was communicating with my child? Did he touch her? "Did you lift the lid all by yourself?" I asked her. "No silly Mama!" she replied. "We waited till you went out of the room and then he carried me. Didn't you see him? He was sitting in the bed with us all the time!" she smiled.

My blood ran cold.

That insidious creature had invaded his way into my daughter's life and was befriending her! But how? Was I projecting some sort of horror onto my child? Was my mind playing horrible tricks on the both of us? The Box Man was my enemy; how did he reach my daughter? Not content with ruining my childhood, he had set his sights on hers! I would not have it! My daughter would not suffer the same way I did, and neither would my unborn child. I may have been a cowardly child but I would not be a cowardly mother! But

what could I do? Oh God I needed some help! My thoughts ran in all directions.

I held her on my lap bed and sat down heavily on my bed to consider my options; breathing slowly and deeply to calm myself. The fact that she was inside the toy chest, baffled me as it was too heavy for her to lift it. She could not have crawled into it on her own. Unbelievable as it may seem, the Box Man had done it. Of this I began to be certain.

I realized that the toy chest was the vehicle for him to access me, somehow he was tied to it, and bringing it back home had reintroduced him to my life, to our lives. I had to get rid of it. But how? Pregnant and alone, I could not lift the box, let alone drag it out of the house and down the hillside. Setting it on fire wouldn't help either, as it had survived the fire at home. I decided to try breaking it with a rusty old axe I had seen in my husband's tools. I could do this, I HAD to do this.

Settling my daughter in front of a marathon cartoon session I went about locating the axe. It was rusty but it would have to do. Feeling nervous and alone, my hands quivering with fear and the weight of the axe, I went into the playroom to confront the toy chest. I was conflicted when I saw it, it was perhaps the only surviving remnant of my childhood, and again a little voice in my head was ringing a tiny alarm. "Don't do it. This is your childhood, all that's left!" the voice said. I hesitated before lifting the axe, but only for a fraction of a second. I realized the Box Man was trying to get into my head and I would not let him. This was his voice, his directions. I would not follow them.

I swung the axe as high as I could, but it was not easy. I was tired, confused from the last few sleepless nights, and as if sensing my loss of focus, my baby kicked me swiftly in the ribs. It served as the wake-up call I needed. A reminder: my kids needed me to banish this monster from our lives. With a greater resolve, I lifted the axe high above my head and putting all my weight into it, I brought it crashing down on the lid of chest. The axe literally bounced off the

surface as if made of rubber and the box stood gleaming and pristine in the sun. Not a dent, not a scratch, it was unharmed. I tried again and again but all my efforts were in vain, the box suffered no damage absolutely. The damn thing was unbreakable.

Exhausted, I slumped against the wall staring at it, racking my brains for a solution. Should I wait for my husband to come back? Could my daughter and me survive another hideous night at the Box Man's mercy? My head buzzing, I could not bear the thoughts rushing through my mind, and they chilled me to my core. What horrors would he inflict on us tonight? I realized that whatever action I had to take, had to be taken today. This man lived through my subconscious, he fed off my fear and he was becoming stronger every day. This was my personal battle with him, but he was using me to get to my family. I would never allow this to happen, he would never again touch my children. Oh God I was scared, but something stronger than fear was beginning to course through my veins. My resolve to protect my babies, their innocence, their childhoods.

My choices were none, my path was obvious. We would not suffer another night of his terror. I was sure of what I had to do and nothing would stop me now. Picking up the axe, I climbed into the box. "It's just you and me now" I told him as I climbed inside the box, shutting the heavy lid on top of me, plunging me into pitch darkness "Bring it on, Box Man".

Kali Rawat

Kali is an author who dons many hats. A Professor of Fashion Design, a mother and new author, her work is an evocative take on the realities of life. She has previously published a book of short stories called "The Well and Other Stories", in addition to several research papers on varied topics ranging from fashion to feminism. Kali lives in Mumbai, India with her family but dreams of retiring to the Himalayas and writing full time in front of a roaring fire as the snow swirls outside her windows.

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