

All Kinds of Monsters

By

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With a grunt, the fat man bent and yanked his bag off the carousel. Jacob watched him, his eyes wide with 11-year-old curiosity. The man was strange looking, gigantically fat, pale and doughy, with tiny eyes. He hadn't been on the plane with Jacob and his mom and dad, their luggage was coming up on another carousel.

The man set his bag on the floor. It was big. It was black, like so many other bags were, but different somehow. Blacker. As if it ate the light that fell upon it. There was something Jacob didn't like about the bag. Just looking at it gave him the chills. He was about to turn away when the bag squirmed.

That's the only way he could describe it. A shudder ran through the fabric as if it wasn't cloth, stitching, and a handle, but something breathing and alive.

Jacob shook his head and turned to his mother and father who were still scanning for their own luggage. They hadn't seen the fat man's bag move. Of course they hadn't. Even if they'd been looking that way, they still wouldn't have seen it. Jacob understood a few things about the world. One of them was that by the time you got old enough to have children, you forgot how to really see things.

He turned back to the fat man's bag. He stepped closer, studying it. As he did, he saw the fabric twitch, fast, like the blinking of an eye.

The fat man put his hand on his suitcase and stroked it with a motion that reminded Jacob of someone petting a favorite cat.

Jacob looked up. The fat man was staring at him, a smile drawn across his features. There was nothing friendly in that smile. It was the grin of a jungle animal about to feast.

Jacob stepped back until he fetched up against his mother.

There was something wrong with the fat man. Something bad. Jacob could almost smell it, like meat that had been left in the fridge too long and had gone all green and stinky.

"Jacob, help me with this." It was his father, pulling one of their suitcases off the belt while another came into view around the corner.

Jacob got a hand on the bag, raised the handle, and wheeled it out of the way, giving dad room to land the next.

As he did, Jacob's eyes returned to the fat man. The fat man was hauling another bag off the belt. A normal bag with a strap that he slung over his shoulder.

Jacob could see the difference at once. The bag on the fat man's shoulder was just a bag. The other one was something else. Something bad. Something bad that was just pretending to be a suitcase.

“Okay, let’s do it.” Jacob turned as his dad spoke. They had all their luggage and started off toward the elevators that would take them up to the Airtrain station.

Jacob felt a sudden shiver run down his back and looked behind him. The fat man was walking the same direction they were.

He had his big bag with him. He carried it. Everyone else in the airport had bags that rolled, but the fat man carried his by a thick, leather handle. The suitcase knocked against his thighs as he puffed along.

As they stepped into the elevator, Jacob saw that the fat man was going to get on with them. He felt sudden panic. Fear of being closed in with the fat man and his bag reared up over him, like a creature out of the muck.

But it was too late. Jacob and his parents were pressed toward the back, hemmed in by people on all sides. There was nowhere to go.

The fat man got on. As he did, Jacob felt the elevator settle, as if the fat man weighed even more than his size suggested. Jacob felt the air suddenly cool, as if someone had switched on an air conditioner.

The doors closed. Jacob felt nervous fingers tickle the inside of his belly. He pushed closer to his mom, shivering.

Everyone else on the elevator looked ahead, or at the person they were with. Jacob watched the fat man’s bag.

The fat man stroked his suitcase, slowly, lovingly. As Jacob watched, a tendril of material broke off the bag. It resembled a spider’s leg, only with hundreds of joints so it moved like a snake. It had tiny hairs all over it, and a sharp talon at the end. The thing rose from the bag’s surface and twined itself around the fat man’s finger like a black vine.

Jacob gasped.

The fat man flicked his finger, the tendril retracted.

Jacob looked up. The fat man was staring at him again, his tiny, piggish eyes hard and cold. He wasn’t smiling.

Jacob knew he had seen something he wasn’t supposed to see. He dropped his gaze, looked at his feet, scrunching as far away from the fat man as he could in the crowded elevator. He counted his heartbeats which now slammed loudly in his ears. *One... two... three...*

He prayed to himself. *Don’t let him hurt me. Don’t let him hurt my mom or my dad.* He understood now, the fat man wanted to hurt him, wanted to hurt all of them.

The elevator lurched to a halt. As the doors opened to reveal the Airtrain station, Jacob felt a sweet rush of relief.

The fat man got off first, picking up his suitcase and huffing out the door without even a last look back.

Jacob watched the bag, saw it bulge and shiver again.

He followed his mom and dad off the elevator, hoping the fat man wouldn’t be taking the train they’d be taking, hoping he’d be going the other direction.

But he saw the fat man walk to the same side of the platform his mom and dad were heading for.

Jacob stopped dead. His mother and father looked down. “Come on, Jake,” his dad said.

"There's something wrong," Jacob whispered.

"What? What's wrong? Did you forget something?" His Mom's darting eyes quickly tallied their luggage and carry-ons.

Jacob stepped closer to them. "That man," he whispered. "The fat man with the black bag."

Jacob looked over their shoulders. The man was staring at him again, his lips stretched into a flat grin, like someone had sliced his featureless face open with a knife.

"The bag, it's not a bag." Jacob said.

"What is it?" his dad asked.

Jacob was silent for a second. What to say? What else could he say? "It's a monster," Jacob said.

His mom and dad exchanged a puzzled look. "A monster?" his dad asked. "That man is a monster?"

"Not the man," Jacob whispered. "His suitcase. His suitcase is a monster. I saw it move."

His mom sighed. "Oh, Jake, you're tired."

His dad ruffled his hair. "What an imagination my kid has, huh?"

Jacob wanted to scream and yell, but knew that wouldn't help. "Mom, dad please," Jacob said as seriously as he could. "I saw it move, I swear. It had some kind of claw. It's a monster. There's something wrong. We have to call the police. I think something bad's gonna happen."

His mom touched his cheek with soft fingers. "Jake, there's no such things as monsters."

Jacob sighed. There's no such thing as monsters. That's what they always said.

"Jake," his dad said softly. "What's going on, buddy?"

Jacob leaned closer. He had to make them understand. "It's a monster, dad. I saw it move and I saw it touch him and I think..." Jacob felt his eyes watering, his nose clogging. He fought to stop himself from crying. "I think it's hungry," he whispered.

"Well, I'll say one thing." His mom threw an angry glance at his dad. "No more horror movies for you two."

Jacob stared at her. What could he say? How could he convince her? His brain spun, but came up with nothing. If only they'd seen it. But they hadn't seen it. He was the only one who had and no one was listening to him.

With a swoosh of brakes, a train pulled into the station. A chime sounded as the doors opened.

"Come on, Jake," his dad said. "Let's go home. Everything will be fine, I promise." He stood and pulled Jacob toward the train. Jacob scanned the platform. The fat man was gone.

He felt a swell of relief and walked to the train with his dad.

As they approached the door, Jacob looked inside.

The fat man was there, seated against the far wall in the middle of the car, his bag on the floor between his knees.

He was staring at Jacob. That predatory smile was back - a smile that spoke as plainly as words: *They'll never believe you. They'll never believe you and you'll be mine.*

Jacob stopped four feet from the open doors, yanking so hard on his dad's hand that his dad almost fell over as he spun around. His mom turned.

"Hurry up, Jacob," she said. "The doors are going to close."

"Don't get on," he said.

"Jacob." His father's voice was edged with annoyance, annoyance drifting toward anger. He let go of his son's hand and stepped toward the train. "Come on."

"No, dad," Jacob said. "Don't go in there."

A man pushed past his father with an angry grunt. Jacob saw his dad's eyes narrow. "Stop this foolishness right now," he said.

Jacob looked at his mom. He felt his eyes tearing up again. "Mom please, please, don't get on the train."

His mother leaned closer. "He's really scared," she said. More people filed on the train behind her. It was filling quickly.

His father snorted and reached a hand to seize Jacob's arm. Jacob knew what was coming next. His father would grab him, and drag him on the train with some angry words.

And they'd all die.

He knew that for sure. If they got on the train, they were going to die. Everyone in the car with the fat man and his bag was going to die. He had to do something. He had to save them, but he knew he couldn't. He was just a boy, he could say whatever he wanted, and no one would believe him. His parents wouldn't believe him. None of the people on the train would believe him. They were all grownups and grownups didn't believe in monsters.

Except there were all kinds of monsters.

Jacob ducked away from his dad, raised a finger, pointed it at the fat man. "Bomb!" Jacob yelled as loud as he could. "He's got a bomb!"

Everyone on the platform, everyone in the train car turned to him as if yanked with hidden strings. His father went white. Jacob kept shouting. "I saw it. In his suitcase. He's got a bomb. He's got a bomb in his suitcase!"

His father jerked back as if slapped. "Jacob, stop that right now."

On the train, a few of the passengers turned nervously to each other. Three college-aged girls who were about to get on stepped away. A man and woman backed out the far set of open doors.

The fat man's smile vanished. He popped up from his seat, his eyes boring into Jacob.

Jacob dodged as his father lunged for him again. "Get off the train," Jacob yelled. "He's got a bomb. He's going to kill everyone."

His father grabbed at him, Jacob ducked back. People were streaming off the train faster now.

The fat man grabbed up his suitcase, moved toward the door, but the other people on the train blocked him as they rushed the exit. The fat man raised a pudgy arm, trying to push through them, fighting his way to the door.

Coming for Jacob. Jacob met the fat man's eyes. "Bomb." Jacob's voice echoed. "Bomb."

A chime rang.

"Jacob! Come here this instant." His father, furious, reaching for him.

Jacob looked back at the train. The fat man's face was twisted in anger as he knocked another man aside and lunged at the train doors.

They closed in his face.

The fat man slapped up against them. He glared at Jacob through the glass, and then his expression softened into a knowing smile. Jacob read that smile: *another time, perhaps?*

The fat man pulled himself away from the doors and moved to the center of the train. Of the thirty or so who had been on the train, only a few remained. They looked around nervously, unsure of what to do as, with a whirr, the train began to move.

A hand grabbed his arm. His father - as angry as Jacob had ever seen him. He spun Jacob to him and knelt, bringing them face to face. "What do you think you're doing, young man? What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you know how much trouble you're in for this?"

The hard words slapped at him, but Jacob didn't listen. He leaned past his dad to watch as the train pulled out toward the end of the platform.

Jacob could see the fat man. He was no longer looking at Jacob; he was staring down - at his suitcase. There were five other people on the train with him. A part of Jacob's mind counted them. For the rest of his life, he would remember the positions in which they stood as they rolled past.

Then, as the car pulled out of the station and was nearly lost to sight, Jacob saw a sudden explosion of blackness inside the train. A writhing mass filled the car. Blood splattered the windows. For a fraction on an instant, Jacob watched as a businessman was thrown against the glass, a tentacle wrapped around his face, tearing his skin off in wide strips.

And then the train was gone, lost to sight behind the platform wall.

Jacob's dad shook him. "You are in big trouble, Jacob, big..."

A scream split the air.

Jacob and his dad turned. One of the young women who had gotten off the train was pointing to the place where the train had disappeared from view. Her face was white. Her outstretched hand shook.

"His face," she said. "His face. It was eating his face. Oh my God, I saw it and it was eating his face." She gave a strangled gurgle and collapsed to the tiles.

Jacob's dad shot to his feet and ran to her. "Give her room," his dad shouted. "Give her room."

Jacob watched the scene as if through the wrong end of a telescope, watched as his dad shoved his cell phone at one of the girls and commanded her to call 911.

A warm hand fell on his shoulder as his mom leaned down to him. He looked into her eyes, and he knew - she had seen it too.

"Jake," she said. "What... what was it?"

A storm of black tentacles. A man's skin torn away from bone. Blood spraying as the thing fed.

Jacob began to cry, hot tears running down his cheek.
"Monster," Jacob whispered.