

FAVORITE MONSTER

stories by
SHARMA SHIELDS



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PITTSBURGH

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THE MCGUGLE ACCOUNT



We were all surprised when Brian hired the Cyclops. His references only spoke Greek. His sole job experience was shepherding. It was uncertain if he could commit to two years. No matter. Brian saw something formidable in him. He had followed a similar hunch when he hired me. Despite my lack of PR experience, and despite my nervous stutter during the interview, I had become one of our company's top performers.

I was speaking on my headset to a client when I saw the Cyclops for the first time. From my cramped cubicle I admired his backside as he exited Brian's office. I've always been attracted to tall men with broad shoulders, and given my collegiate foray into the punk scene, I didn't even blink at the tiny green sprig of hair that sat like a piece of unmown lawn atop his head. No, it wasn't until he turned that I saw why others described him as revolting: the large eye, settled like a rough diamond above his eyebrows (not under them, as many would think) was, to put it mildly, intimidating. But what an eye it was! The color of warm sand, bright and penetrating. So penetrating that when he caught my gaze I swore he could see the color of my bones beneath my expensive tweed suit and inexpensive (and somewhat gritty) bra and underwear. And that voice! I heard him now, as he spoke to Brian, and I stopped talking in mid-sentence to Mrs. Lipman so that I could eavesdrop more effectively.

I had barely begun to enjoy the Cyclops' melodic enthusiasm about working with our company when my client, Mrs. Lipman, began chirping in my right ear. After her tedious public involvement with crank and the home shopping network, she hungered for as much counsel as she could get. "Hello, Carol?" Mrs. Lipman said. "Can you hear me? You're speaking on your headset again, aren't you, Carol. I've asked you repeatedly not to use your headset. It makes you sound like some robot from distant space. Can you hear me, Carol? You were saying something about my choice of tortillas, correct? About choosing the tortillas with the pink ribbon? The breast cancer tortillas? Instead of the white cheapies?"

"An analogy, Mrs. Lipman," I said. "My point is that for someone so famous, the smallest choices you make will influence the media's opinion of you." She marveled over this statement, saying "Yes, I see," pleased as she

always was with any grandiose platitude. Around me, chairs scraped back and polite laughter ballooned. Brian was introducing the Cyclops around the office. I told Mrs. Lipman I would call her back and hung up.

Brian and the Cyclops approached my desk, smiling broadly. I stood and extended my hand. Like prairie dogs risen from their earthen holes, the heads of my colleagues bobbed above the cubicle walls, their expressions less curious than bored.

With a sense of wonderment I allowed the Cyclops' hand to swallow up my own. "It's a delight to meet you, Ms. Horne," he said. "Brian was raving about your work here."

So soft, his voice, as though it could lull you to sleep. He was very well-spoken for a Cyclops.

I told this to my colleague Kent later that day. Kent grunted and rolled his eyes.

"More proof of Brian's incompetence," Kent said. His gelled hair sat stiffly on his head like the shining blade of a guillotine. "He's obviously a monster. Did you smell him?"

"Like cooked garbage," an intern agreed.

"I thought he was nice," I said. We were standing around the fax machine, five or six of us, waiting for our faxes to crawl out of the machine's unsmiling mouth.

"'Nice' is the adjective people use when they don't have something better to say," Kent intoned. Then he sang loudly, "Carol's found a new boyfriend."

My coworkers laughed. "Yeah, right," I said with feigned playfulness. "I mean, come on, he's totally gross. Really, he's disgusting."

But truthfully, I didn't find the Cyclops gross or disgusting. Aside from the large club he always carried ("For wolves or worse," he told me), and despite the smell of livestock that trailed him everywhere, he was far more refined and thoughtful than the other men in the office. His pants – while faintly stained – were always neatly pressed. He could quote entire poems of Yeats and Sappho. Even more impressive was that he always asked everyone, no matter how busy he was, how his or her day was going. Clients perceived his incongruity as a sign of superiority and began requesting his services. To my delight, we were teamed up on a new project together, and after a few engaging weeks I complimented him on his impressive vocabulary and grammar.

"I read a lot of books in the field," the Cyclops explained. He meant field literally, as in the field where he shepherded goats. I pictured him loll-

ing on a vast green hillside, his feet and chest bare, holding a hardcover book above his face at just the right angle to block the hot Mediterranean sun.

"Any favorites?" I asked. I had been a literature major in college and in my rare haughty moments fancied myself a scholar.

"Of our contemporaries I enjoy Cormac McCarthy. I like tales of war and death. But the authors I forever return to are long perished: Tolstoy, Homer, Proust. Have you ever read Proust?"

Proust was one of those authors I wanted desperately to read but knew I never would. I had been assigned a few chapters in college that I completely blew off for a week of reality television. For much of my life I wore my unfamiliarity with Proust like a red cloak of literary shame. The fact that even this spelunking Cyclops had read Proust was a bit humiliating.

"Proust," I said. "Yes, of course."

The Cyclops smiled at me, displaying the crooked gray kernels of his teeth. "I like you, Carol," he said. "You don't seem like the type that would work in a PR firm."

"Neither do you," I told him. This time I wasn't lying.

Why lie about Proust? Even as I was telling the lie some part of my brain was screaming at me, *Don't lie you idiot, you won't be judged for it!* But I had a severe problem with wanting to please people. Especially people I liked. Like Brian, my boss. Or the Cyclops. Or Amanda Davenport in grade school, whose hair was always smooth and shining and who could always color perfectly within the lines. I told her that I, too, used to be a coloring expert, but after a debilitating car wreck that shattered my wrists (and scorched my hair, making it frizzy), it was all I could do to stay on the page. Amanda informed the teacher and the teacher called my mom and that night I had to lean against the cold bathroom sink for five minutes with a bar of soap in my mouth. This did not keep me from lying again, although it did make me more careful about the magnitude of lie. I shied away from the larger deceptions and began living in a white smoke of smaller half-truths. So it was when I lied to the Cyclops about Proust. And it was admittedly gratifying when he beamed back at me. I could see my watery reflection projected affectionately in his enormous brown-flecked eye. But as ever when I lied, the gnawing disappointment in myself, and the gnawing feeling that I was about to get caught, diminished the magnitude of my triumph. I smiled back at him half-heartedly.

A few days later the McGugle Account was created. The Cyclops and I were assigned to the same team. I was typically the Go-To Girl in such

situations, but the McGugle Corporation had fallen into near disrepair. The youngest McGugle son was in court, defending himself from three sexual harassment accusations. The McGugle trophy wife was an admitted coke-head and alcoholic. While on a wine-tasting tour of the Yakima Valley, she drove her car through the brick wall of a winery's tasting room. Mr. McGugle, himself, was rumored to be the most avid patron of a high-class escort ring. It was a big company and a bigger mess.

"You mortals," the Cyclops muttered with a woeful shake of his head. We were eating pizza slices in the office near midnight. We were trying to find a positive light in all of this. "No matter what you have, it's never enough."

Kent found this remark offensive. "What about you? You were a shepherd. Wasn't that a blissful enough existence? It's not like you were recruited here, you know."

Some of my colleagues snorted. Earlier, the Cyclops had shoveled down an entire goat cheese pizza while the hungry interns glowered at him. They had shuffled in their chairs and muttered angrily to one another but avoided any direct invective. The Cyclops' large spiked club lay casually on the table near his Blackberry and the interns eyed it uneasily.

"For your information," the Cyclops said tersely, "my goats died." He had pizza sauce on his earlobe. He started to say something else but then stopped.

"What," the boldest of the interns responded, "did you eat them?"

The Cyclops' face reddened.

"We're getting off task," I said loudly. "Let's please turn our attention back to the press release. I personally enjoy the idea of a McGugle Bazaar. Anyone else?"

As the team began their vociferous opining, I caught the Cyclops' eye and touched my earlobe carefully. His eye widened. He reached up with his giant hairy hand to remove the sauce from his ear. It smeared onto his fingers like blood. He gazed back at me gratefully. I considered winking but abstained, as I assumed such an innocuous gesture could be offensive to any creature possessing only one eye.

An hour later the Cyclops escorted me to my car. He held his club menacingly and commented that a young beautiful woman should not be walking alone so late at night. I blushed. "Thirty-five is not so young," I told him.

"You're a mere girl in Cyclops years."

We reached my car. I jangled my keys. "Well," I said. "Thank you."

"No, thank you." His eye was staring down at me mushily. I was nervous that he would try to kiss me right then and there in the parking lot, where one of my colleagues might find us.

Instead he leaned against his club and looked up at the stars. "Desire makes everything bloom," he said wistfully.

"What?"

The Cyclops looked down at me again. "Don't you remember Proust?"

For lack of an answer, I dropped my keys. I stooped to pick them up, and so did the Cyclops, and his forehead hit the back of my head so hard that I dropped to the ground. Yellow blotches swarmed like bees in my vision.

"Oh dear," he said. "That smarts, I'll bet." He helped me to my feet. In the lamplight, his face was wretched and scarred and now twisted with worry.

"I'm alright," I said, brushing his hands away. My ears rang and my head ached. "I'm alright."

I got in my car. He rapped on the window with his acorn-sized knuckles. I rolled the window down and looked up at him, smiling nervously.

"I'm sorry about your head," he said softly.

"I know. It's okay. It was an accident."

"I really meant it when I said thank you."

I smoothed my skirt under my thighs and then poked the key into the ignition.

"You haven't read Proust," he said suddenly, folding his wide hairy fingers over the door. It was not a question. I sat back in surprise, my hands dropping into my lap. "I knew it."

His voice was gentle, forgiving. Something like a large flower opened sadly within me. "I didn't mean to lie," I said, even though that was a lie, too. I wanted to recline in the front seat and go to sleep.

The Cyclops cleared his throat. "Lies are essential to humanity. They are perhaps as important as the pursuit of pleasure and moreover are dictated by that pursuit." He crouched down next to me as he spoke, his big head hanging like a rough pale planet in the window.

"Proust again?" I said. He nodded and reached for me. He pressed his big lips onto mine. I was surprised at how gentle and sweet he was, quite the opposite of what you would expect from one so big and rough. I opened my eyes to find his wide high eye staring absently over my hairline. He released me and invited me to his cave.

Despite my rattling heart I managed to say, "Should I drive?"

The Cyclops squeezed into my car by reclining the passenger seat down flat and lying prone, giving directions to his cave via the stars he read through the open sunroof. I was too nervous to speak now. I glanced at his enormous Grecian thighs in his khakis (where did he buy those, I wondered) and worried if making love to a Cyclops was even technically possible. These were frightening thoughts, but then he reached over and with his large hand stroked my hair, and the sweetness of this gesture soothed me. I was under a spell. When instructed I turned the steering wheel obediently, forgetting the blinker. When he spoke I listened with all of my heart. When we reached his cave half the night had passed and the spindly moon had already set, but to me, content in my lustful suffering, the drive had been a mere pinprick in the vast open wound of time.

We were somewhere far from Seattle. Eastern Washington, I assumed, in a land of rolling hills and no trees. Machines had carved enormous circles into the farmland so that they resembled landing platforms for visiting spaceships. We were on top of the highest butte in sight, looking out over the smaller hills that undulated like a frozen ocean into the dark horizon. The night was clear; the wind was fierce. My hair was whipped into my eyes as I stepped from the car, and the stinging strands were momentarily blinding. One of my high heels broke. I did not complain. I merely slipped off my shoes and trod on the cool dirt toward the rocky outcropping where the Cyclops stood waiting for me. He motioned for me to go ahead of him. I walked with feigned bravery between two large boulders and into the hillside. The smell was very strong, farm animals and grain. I couldn't see anything in the inky blackness.

"Here we go," the Cyclops said, striking a match. A fire exploded into light and the room flickered into view. The high ceilings were domed nicely overhead and the rock walls were lined with large attractively painted jugs.

"Wine," he grunted, uncorking a jug and pressing it to his mouth. The wine dribbled down his chin and onto his Ralph Lauren polo.

He passed the wine jug to me. I wasn't strong enough to grip it, so he gingerly brought it to my lips. It was delicious. The taste helped to lessen the fecund animal smell emanating from the corner, where a pen of three goats bleated incessantly for their dinner.

"These are my children," the Cyclops boasted cheerfully. "Well, not really of course, but I care for them like they are." He told me their names in Greek, but I only caught the name of Hector, a small gray goat with dull yellow horns. "I'm building up my flock again. Three is an okay start, but I'd