

“Daddy, why is mommy so cold?”

She was dead. Maurice knew that much, but why was she so cold? His father, a stout man named Gregory, was silent. Everyone knows we die. Not even children deny it. Yet knowing a fact and believing it are different. Maurice knew his mother lay dead in her casket. Gregory explained the custom of a wake to him in advance. Yet while Maurice was old enough to acknowledge death, he was too young to believe his mother could die. They did not speak on the drive home. As they passed between houses, Maurice thought the vacant windows resembled his mother’s empty eyes. Maurice hardly breathed, and his father dared not look at him. They moved not long after. That was when Maurice began seeing monsters.

Gregory made his living as an event coordinator. He originally focused on local events, mainly weddings. After his wife’s death, he began coordinating large-scale festivals and trade shows. This required him to travel across the country. Often he would rent a new house, but never spent enough time there to settle down. As a result, Maurice never formed strong attachments or friendships. However, he saw plenty of monsters. Each new home contained some dark presence. Be it a ghoulish face in the bedroom window, a cold spot in the basement, or creaking in the attic. Gregory insisted the claws in the moonlight were only gnarled trees. He told Maurice he saw the silhouettes of cobwebs on the staircase, not ghosts. Their humid cellar contained insects, not demons. That did not explain the dank smell in the kitchen of their next home. Maurice thought it was a vampire. He warned his father that it must sleep under the sink, for lack of a coffin. It bode its time until night, whispered Maurice, when it slunk out to drink their blood.

Their latest home was different though. Even when he saw its photograph, Maurice felt uneasy. The emotion almost did not exist, save for his vaguest contemplation. The fear only appeared when he arrived in person. It was sunset. Gregory stood outside the car. He admired the house from the curb before rushing indoors. Maurice studied every inch. He gazed from the gables to the garden. His eyes found an upstairs window, soon to be his bedroom. There he saw Uncle Scratch, dimly lit from below as the sun melted behind the clouds. His form was visible in the dying light, yet his features remained hidden. Maurice’s expression bore no surprise. The boy was experienced at recognizing monsters. They were all worrisome, yet Maurice knew Uncle Scratch would be the worst. Most monsters were eager to reveal their presence. Their hideous faces quickly appeared in his nightmares. That day, Maurice only saw Uncle Scratch’s moss-coloured eyes. Then he left the windowpane and submerged into darkness.

In other ways, Uncle Scratch was like any monster. He appeared at night and resided within the bedroom closet. Maurice took care to keep it spotless. Monsters are less inclined to haunt clean spaces. During the first night, Uncle Scratch’s stare confronted him. His mossy eyes betrayed an insatiable hunger. Maurice knew that Uncle Scratch did not care for flesh. He wanted something more, and Maurice feared it was worse.

Maurice owned a night-light. It was a gift from his mother, and it comforted him in other homes. He tried to use it here, but it was disturbing to have a light illuminating Uncle

Scratch. Maurice cringed at the sight of the slimy rats. Uncle Scratch's gloved hands stroked them as they writhed. His touch was never gentle. They scurried over his suit, clashing with his unwrinkled tie and spotless white gloves. This cleanliness amplified the rats' repulsiveness.

Once, a rat attempted to issue a warning. He told Maurice not to accept Uncle Scratch's treats. Before it finished, Uncle Scratch pulled the rat away. He dropped it into his pocket by its tail. Maurice heard it squeal as it disappeared. Then Uncle Scratch spoke to him. His whisper was coaxing, almost friendly. He offered Maurice a treat, but he did not accept. Uncle Scratch left, promising to bring Maurice another surprise tomorrow. Maurice shuddered, for monsters never spoke. They waited until Maurice fell asleep before venturing forward. Waking chased them away. Uncle Scratch could not be frightened so easily, every night Maurice heard him beckon.

Uncle Scratch proved strenuous for Gregory as well. "Go to bed!" he ordered, as he listened to the radio.

"But Daddy, Uncle Scratch will be up there," Maurice sobbed. "He'll show me some candy or a toy; he'll try to get me! Please Daddy. It's getting harder to resist him every night. He just won't ever give up."

"Your obsession with monsters is tiresome," sighed his father. "It's those pulp magazines you read. If they hadn't belonged to your mother, I'd have burned the lot to ashes."

Maurice listened for a moment, until the ball game on the radio returned. Gregory turned away to enjoy it. Maurice hated sports; he never understood why his father fussed over them. Sighing, Maurice went upstairs for bed. As he departed, Gregory called after him. "Remember to brush your teeth!" After three steps, Maurice stopped. He studied the stairs. He wondered about the creaking. In an earlier house, Lady Swoon-Moon made similar sounds. He remembered her long teeth. She painted them like candy canes with the blood of children. To Maurice, each creak was the sound of munching. He visualized her crouched over the bones of innocent victims. Maurice quaked in fear. He ran up the stairs and saw the bathroom door. It was a foot from his bedroom. Maurice needed to relieve himself. The bathroom seemed miles away. He stepped forward, and heard a creak. His bedroom door was open, and a rat scurried out.

"Don't listen to him Maurice," it squeaked. "He told me there'd be a dollhouse..." The rat never finished. The door opened wider and Uncle Scratch's hand shot forward. He clutched the rat, and dragged it into the bedroom. It screamed in the voice of a young girl. The door shut, and Uncle Scratch's eye materialized in the keyhole. It stared at Maurice lustfully. The boy bolted into the bathroom, and slammed the door. He quivered on the toilet seat for hours. Eventually, his eyes shut and he fell asleep. Meanwhile, his closet door opened and Uncle Scratch crept out. Through the bathroom keyhole, he studied Maurice. His expression sparkled with anticipation. "Soon," he whispered as his tongue massaged his lips.

Gregory had fallen asleep listening to his radio. He awoke suddenly, and his lips parted in fear. He studied his radio vacantly. A re-run of Lights Out was playing. He switched it off, while his free hand fumbled into his pocket for matches. Quivering, he lit his pipe. "Good Lord," he whispered to himself. "What a nightmare." His face sunk as he remembered fragments of his dream: gloved hands, rats, and mossy eyes. Someone he knew was screaming in that dream, someone young. "I better check on Maurice," he whimpered to himself. He trod up the stairs, through the hallway, and into Maurice's room.

"My God!" he exclaimed upon entering. He stood staring, his hand frozen on the doorknob. Toys littered the floor, but Maurice's bed was empty. His face paled. Then he heard snoring from outside. The bathroom light was on, and he sighed with relief. He smiled as he opened the bathroom door and saw him sleeping. "That's my boy," he sighed. His arms sagged with the child's weight as he lifted him. Maurice's eyes fluttered while his father carried him to his bedroom. They half-opened as the blanket swished over him, before closing once more.

Hours later, Maurice awoke. He silently cursed his foolishness, and wondered how he got into bed. In the darkness, a noise sounded. Yet it was not rats scurrying or children moaning. It was a human voice. Maurice was still, corpse-like. The noise broke the silence like ice cracking. Maurice drew a silent breath and listened closer. There was silence, then a whine. A long sob emerged before the silence returned. Maurice turned his head. The moon outside had disappeared, and the room was black. Another murmur; there was no mistake. Someone was weeping.

Was this Uncle Scratch? Maurice had never heard a monster cry, not even as a trick. A wet sound followed, like a bucket collecting rain. Maurice visualized tears streaming down a woman's face. Another sob; it was nearer now. The dripping continued, accentuated by occasional moans. The sound was feminine. Maurice remembered his mother, and his eyes watered. He debated turning on his lamp, Uncle Scratch would have offered a treat by now. He reached toward the switch, but stopped. There was a fumbling, then a sob near Maurice's ear. In fear, he drew back his hand and the noise ceased. Maurice did not lie down. He feared the presence would hear his mattress. In the dark, something slithered. Maurice sensed the presence under his bed. Sweat tickled his chin, but he was too frightened to wipe it away. The voice returned. It wept under the bed in a constant stream. Did it want his attention? Maurice ventured a question. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

The sound ceased, and Maurice heard a soft creaking as something crawled out from under the bed. There was silence, until a huddled mass formed over the window. "Maurice?" the mass whimpered. "Is that you?" Maurice turned pale, it sounded like his mother. Suddenly, a blue light jarred the mass into a straight stance. Maurice saw that it was indeed his mother. The light emanated from wires fastened to her skull. She floated before him like a spectre.

Maurice tilted his head, and noticed Uncle Scratch illuminated in the corner. His mossy eyes stared at his mother viciously. After several jolts, she floated limply in the air. Uncle Scratch lifted a hammer and an ice pick for Maurice to see. Casually, he strode nearer while Maurice watched helplessly. Floundering electric sparks from the wires occasionally tore through the darkness. In these moments, Maurice watched Uncle Scratch set the hammer down on his bedside table. Uncle Scratch pulled back his mother's left eyelid. Slowly, he inserted the ice pick over the top of her eyeball. He carefully slid it deeper until it hit bone. He retrieved his hammer, and with two taps, he broke through the thin layer of skull. Maurice observed Uncle Scratch scraping behind it. Another two taps and more scraping behind the other eyeball and Uncle Scratch discarded his tools. He turned back to Maurice. "That's what they did to her Maurice," Uncle Scratch whispered. "They didn't even bother to get a doctor to do it, just some staff member. Then they turned her loose, and she took a tumble down the stairs. We both know how that turned out, don't we?"

The blue crackles died with the last of Uncle Scratch's words. Maurice sat in thick darkness. He groped back in bed when he heard Uncle Scratch's sinister voice in the blackness. "I can bring her back Maurice," he said. "There will be a price, but nothing worthwhile is ever free. Just say yes." The sound of rats scuttling behind the walls appeared. A mixture of fear and loneliness consumed Maurice. He wondered if Uncle Scratch could restore his mother. If so, what would remain of her? There was hardly a sound when Maurice whispered, "yes."

In a flash, the room was empty. Maurice turned on his light, and checked under the bed for his mother. He found her sprawled on the floor, gibbering mindlessly. Maurice crawled under the bed and lay with her. He wept and stroked her hair. They exchanged a horrified glance. She opened her mouth to speak, but only drool dripped out. Uncle Scratch had restored her flesh, but her mind was another matter. Moments later, Uncle Scratch's hands snuck under the bed and pulled Maurice away. He locked him in the closet where he was alone with the rats. Uncle Scratch forbade him from calling to his mother, and then whispered, "It's time to pay that price I mentioned."

When a child disappears, questioning the parents is routine police work. The officers escorted Gregory from his home. From the car, he had one glance at the house. He looked upwards, and gazed at the window to Maurice's bedroom. Before the police car departed, he saw a rat on the windowsill. For some reason, the sight disturbed him. It was just as well that his hearing was only average. Had he keen ears, he would have heard a voice squealing, "Daddy, help me. Please, Daddy."

The End