

The Town Drunk

Presents

Bugaboo, Electric Blue

Chandra Renais

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Beth slumped against chenille-covered cushions and stared at the shambles her living room had become. Two suitcases sprawled on the floor, their contents flung to all corners of the room. Books lay scattered, and a half dozen stuffed animals lolled about. A panda, sporting a purple felt flower tacked to one ear and a bald, thready patch on its belly, leered at her from the coffee table. With a grimace and a nudge of her sneaker, Beth sent it to the floor.

Candy wrappers littered the room, twinkling at her in accusation. She'd given them sugar. Laughing in the face of their mother's concern, against dire warnings and dark predictions, she'd given them sugar. She'd kick herself in the morning. She was exhausted.

"Auntieeee! Auntie, c'mere! Please! Auntieeee!"

Dear God, she thought, slumping deeper into the comfort of chenille, *make them sleep*.

"Auntie, come quick!"

Beth sighed and pushed herself up. Since bedtime, there had been three books, four pleas for water, two trips to the bathroom, and one explosive sneeze requiring much tissue. It was now almost eleven. Like the wearied commander of an ancient city besieged, she thought, *Surely, they can't keep this up*.

She pushed open her bedroom door, spilling light to reveal two small figures huddled in the center of her bed. "What is it? Everything okay?"

"There's a monster under the bed." That was Clara, the four-year-old, still sniffing a bit. Rachel, the elder at seven-and-three-quarters, squinted at Beth and yawned.

"Really?"

Clara nodded. Rachel yawned again and reached for her glasses.

“Funny,” Beth said, “I’ve never had monster problems here before.”

Both girls just stared at her. She wondered what her sister would do. With a sigh, she shuffled into the room and perched on a corner of the bed. She was about to say something warm and insightful and comforting when Clara yelped, “Watch your feet!”

Beth jumped off the bed. “Why don’t I take a peek? I’ll look under the bed, make sure there’s nothing there, and we’ll establish a monster-free zone, okay?”

“Okay,” Clara said. “But be careful.”

“Will do.” Beth flicked the lights on and sank down on one knee. She pulled up the dust ruffle.

Two orbs, glowing blue, glared at her from the shadows—two eyes, blinking on a slimy, bloated toad-like creature that chortled and gurgled.

“Holy shit!”

Two gasps rang out from the bed above. “You’re not supposed to use that word,” Rachel whispered.

“Sorry.” Beth remained frozen, her eyes still glued to the monster under the bed. It didn’t move, either. “Umm,” she began, before realizing she didn’t know what to say.

The two girls peered over the edge of the quilt. Clara sniffed and looked excited.

“What should we do?” Rachel asked.

How am I supposed to know? Beth thought. Was this one of those things a person was supposed to pick up on once they grew up—that under-the-bed monsters were real? *Screw that. It should have been Santa Claus. Or the Easter Bunny. Neither of which is slimy.* Keeping an eye on the *thing*, she lowered the dust ruffle.

A pair of sweet, solemn faces stared down at her. Nothing rushed at her from under the bed; nothing exploded in a flurry of motion. She did, however, hear a muffled chuckle. “Okay,” Beth said. “Okay.” She wasn’t willing to concede the monster-ness of whatever was under there, but there was without question *something* there. That made four living things in the room, and only one of them was a responsible adult. *Damn, Beth thought. And self-respecting, responsible adults don’t run away screaming, leaving the kids alone with the monster. Or whatever.*

“Girls?” Beth whispered. “I want you to jump off the bed and run out the door.”

“Really?” Rachel looked doubtful.

“Really. I’ll count to three.”

Clara bounced. “I want to count!”

The dust ruffle stirred with a grumbly *whuff*.

“Go!” Beth yelled. “Go now!”

The girls jumped off the bed and scurried to the door. The dust ruffle did not stir again. Beth, her heart beating in a snazzy new six-eight tempo, frowned, absurdly miffed at the lack of reaction. She wondered if their monster was lazy, or perhaps lacked ambition. With the girls now safe in the hall, Beth abandoned her post and rushed to the door, pulling it closed behind her with a slam.

“You didn’t count,” Clara said.

Rachel nodded, her glasses slipping. The look on her face reminded Beth of car trips in days long since past, and evil sisterly glares in the back seat.

Anne was going to kill her. There was no way around it. Even putting aside the complication of the monster. Even assuming it was just a figment of their collective imaginations, and there really wasn’t a scary, slimy thing intent on mayhem (and maybe worse) lurking under Beth’s bed. She would still be guilty of feeding the girls sugar, letting them stay up way too late, and then humoring them on the whole imagined monster bit.

What would Anne do in this situation? Like the Shadow, mothers know, right? Maybe Beth had imagined the whole thing. She was really tired. She cast a wary glance at the door. Not that tired. I’ve never been that tired in my life.

“What should we do?” Rachel asked.

Be the grown-up, Beth told herself. It just looks like a monster. It was probably something... else. Some kind of new infestation, like those killer bees from Mexico you keep hearing about. Some kind of bloated, blue-eyed frog infestation.

Ideas flashed through her head like an eight-millimeter projector on speed. *Call Anne? No way. Call Jake? Like hell. Call... who?*

While Beth stood thinking, Clara dashed into the living room to grab her stuffed panda. She scrunched it tight to her neck so that it looked like a cuddly panda parasite.

The epiphany hit so hard it hurt.

She herded the girls into the kitchen and picked up the phone. “There are people who take care of things like this.”

“Who?” Rachel asked.

Beth flipped through the first few pages of the phone book so furiously that the proper page ripped right off. She showed it to the girls as she punched in the number, her finger pointing to the relevant entry.

For Clara's benefit, Rachel read it aloud. "Animal Control." Both girls looked skeptical.

So was the dispatcher on the phone. "Could you repeat that? *What's* in your bedroom?"

"A giant frog, I said." Beth listened to the silence. "Look, I didn't say it was a frog; I don't know what it is. It looked like a frog." More silence. "I didn't get a really good look at it."

"A giant frog?"

"Forget the frog part. Focus on giant. Huge. It was the size of a—" Beth struggled to remember. *What, a beagle? No,* "—a Rottweiler. And it's under my bed right now."

Her rising hysteria succeeded where the frog story had not. "Right," the dispatcher said. "Are you safe now?"

"Yes. We're in the kitchen. That *thing*, it's in the bedroom, and the door's shut. I think we're safe."

The girls craned their necks to look at the bedroom door. It remained shut, quiet and innocent-looking.

"I don't think it can open the door," Beth said.

"Right." The dispatcher spoke slowly, and with unnecessary inflection. "I'll send somebody out to take care of it. He should arrive in about five minutes."

"Thank you! Thank you very much." Beth flashed a triumphant grin at her doubtful nieces.

"Whatever you do, don't open that door." She heard a choking, gasping sound on the line and frowned. The dispatcher continued, "We don't know what that frog's capable of. Hang tight, help's on the way."

Beth hung up, bristling at the mockery. "An officer is coming from Animal Control to take care of it," she told the girls.

"I didn't know they did that," Rachel said.

"Yes, well, that's what we pay taxes for. I think."

Clara padded to the fridge, the panda still at her neck. "Can I have a juice box?"

Beth shuddered. There was sugar in that juice. "It's too late for juice. Have a glass of water."

Then she remembered the girl's past accidents. "A sip, have a *sip* of water."

Through the water-getting, the pitiful begging for juice, and the eventual giving up and offering of only a tiny bit of juice, just a sip, apple, all-natural-no-sugar-added, Beth kept one eye on that door. It never moved. Still, she remained on edge, so that when the doorbell rang, she jumped and shrieked, startling the children.

She ran to answer it, the girls at her heels.

He was the most beautiful man she had seen in a good long while. Pretty, way prettier than Jake. Thick, black hair a shade too long, gorgeous green eyes. He smiled and Beth smiled back, stunned into forgetting that she wore no makeup, that her hair looked *exactly* as though she had just seen a monster, and that she wore a faded pink sweatshirt two sizes too big and stained with spaghetti sauce.

"I hear you've got an intruder." Even his voice was beautiful, rich and deep.

Beth could only manage an apologetic shrug. "I don't think it's a frog."

"O-kay." The corners of his eyes crinkled beautifully. He hitched up the smallish cage he'd brought. He also held what appeared to be a lasso on a stick. "I'll just go take a look. It's back here?"

"Yes." The rear view was beautiful, too. "Are you going to open the door? Should I take the girls outside or something?"

"Nah, I don't think there's any need for that. I'll shut the door behind me."

Beth sank onto the sofa, and the girls fell in beside her, one to each side. She tensed as she heard the door open and shut. Relieved, she leaned back. The nice officer was going to take care of everything. She waited for the sound of a scuffle and the victorious emergence of the Animal Control cowboy.

She waited. The sounds of scuffling never arose. The cowboy emerged with no air of victory and no monster. Walking into the living room, he shook his head.

"What?" Beth asked.

"There's nothing back there. I'm sorry. I looked everywhere. You sure it didn't get out?"

"It couldn't have." Her eyes swept the living room. "It couldn't have. It was in there when I shut the door. There's no way."

"Is it possible you didn't see, maybe, what you thought you saw?"

Clara, taking exception to the man's tone, piped up in her aunt's defense. "There was too a

monster!”

“A monster, huh?” His eyes, less beautiful now, narrowed as he took in the candy wrappers on the floor. “Under the bed? Ma’am, could I have a word with you over here?”

Oh, shit, thought Beth. She rose from the sofa with a sinking feeling. “What?”

He kept his voice low; he didn’t look beautiful when he was angry. “Maybe it isn’t my place to say, but you really shouldn’t encourage those kids like this. And calling me out here? That’s a false report. We could fine you for that.”

Beth kept her voice low, too. “There was something under that bed! Clara’s four, so she can call it a monster if she wants, and I don’t know what I saw, but dammit, there was something there.” She steamed and sputtered. “It even made a noise. It snorted.”

“Lady, there’s nothing in there. I’m not going to report this, this time. You do it again, though, you’re looking at a fine, maybe even jail time.” He rattled his little cage with meaning.

Beth positioned herself between the girls and the man, her face turned so they couldn’t see, and mouthed, “Screw you!”

The Animal Control cowboy turned red. “Lady, grow up.” He lifted his lasso on a stick to his shoulder, then left the house with a flourish that seemed inappropriate from a cowboy.

Beth felt like crying. Maybe she *had* imagined the whole thing. *Not frigging likely, but maybe.* “I am grown-up,” Beth told the front door. “I pay bills. I have insurance. I have three kinds of insurance.”

The girls sat still on the sofa. Clara hugged her panda. “Auntie Beth? I think you’re a grown-up.”

“Thanks, sweetie. It’s all relative, though, isn’t it?”

When Clara frowned, puzzled, Rachel rushed to explain. “Relative means—”

“I know what a relative is,” Clara snapped.

The troops were getting cranky. Beth wondered what to do and wished one more time that her sister was there. *Or maybe Mom. Mom would be great right now.*

What if the cowboy was right? What if the thing was gone, disappeared back to wherever it had come from in the first place?

Beth made up her mind and edged down the hall toward the bedroom, then changed her mind and went back for her purse. She had some pepper spray in there. When she got back to the hall, the girls were at the bedroom door.

It was open.

Rachel frowned. “He must have forgotten to close it.”

“It’s okay. The officer said there was nothing in there, so I’m just going to double-check. You know, just to make sure. In the meantime, I want you to get on the dining room table.”

They stared at her, speechless.

“Go on. Hop to.”

“We’re not allowed to get on the table,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, well, just for tonight. Don’t tell your mother.”

Clara grinned, and she and her panda climbed onto the forbidden land. Rachel followed, dazed, as though unable to comprehend the odd turns the night had taken. With the girls safely stashed, Beth got out her spray, swung her purse to her shoulder, and stepped into her bedroom.

As it turned out, the beautiful jerk had been right. There was no monster under the bed. There was no monster hiding behind the door, in the laundry hamper, or in the closet. No monster here, there, or anywhere. Beth felt both relieved and put out. She wandered out to give the girls the news.

And screamed, jumping on the table with them. The girls noticed the source of her alarm and they screamed too.

It was bigger now. Still not Rottweiler sized—Beth saw she had exaggerated before—but bigger than it had been. It seemed to still be growing. And she didn’t remember those claws. Sprouting from webbed feet like that, claws looked downright unnatural.

It moved toward them, lumbering really, pulling itself forward in a cumbersome shuffle.

Well, that’s not that bad, Beth thought. *We could outrun that.*

“You were right,” Rachel said. “It does look like a frog. Like a fat rainforest frog from the jungles.”

“Guatelama!” Clara yelled it like a battle cry, shaking her panda at the monster.

“It’s *Guatemala*, stupid!” Rachel exploded.

“Girls!” Beth shouted. “Stop!”

Clara reached to hit her sister, and dropped the panda. It tumbled to the floor. They all froze. Even the monster.

“Daisy!” Clara screamed. She lunged for the stuffed animal, almost toppling off the table, before Beth caught her back.

And then the panda was no more. Fluff and faux fur went flying about the room. Some of the lighter pieces floated up before their faces. Beth’s jaw dropped. Rachel’s lower lip quivered. Clara started to cry.

The monster’s teeth were very long and very sharp. *I don’t remember seeing teeth before*, Beth thought.

“He ate Daisy!” Clara wailed.

“Daisy was stupid and she was falling apart,” Rachel said. “Maybe Mom can get you a better panda.”

“I want to go home. Mitch never ate Daisy.”

The monster plopped itself down with a *whomp*, munching away at the cottony wisps of Daisy’s remains.

Rachel pushed her glasses up. “Yeah, I wish Mitch was here.”

Me too, Beth thought. “Who’s Mitch?”

Clara scowled, peeking over the table at the beast below. “Mitch *stays* under the bed.”

“Who’s Mitch?”

Rachel looked at Clara.

“That’s our monster at home,” the younger girl answered. “Mitch is my monster.” She pursed her lips. “I don’t like yours.”

Rachel hunched over, elbows to knees. “I’m sorry, Auntie Beth, but I don’t like it, either.” She hurried to add, “I liked dinner, though. That was good. I’ll tell Mom you can *too* cook.”

“Thank you, honey. That’s very kind.” Anne probably would not be impressed by spaghetti, but it was a nice gesture regardless. “So, you’ve got one of these at home, huh?”

“Not like this one. This one’s *rude*.”

The monster spat out a piece of mauled and sticky white fur. Clara gave up chastising it and huddled close to Beth.

“It’s not mine,” Beth said. “I’ve never seen it before tonight. So... if you already have a monster at home, then who’s this? Some kind of bugaboo freelancer?”

“What’s a bugaboo?” Clara asked.

“What’s a freelancer?” Rachel asked.

“Oh, dear,” said the lavender rabbit in the hall.

Beth and the girls goggled, wide-eyed, as the plush rabbit hippity-hopped to the table. From its furry bunched toes to the peaks of its stiffly upright ears, it stood no more than three feet high. With dignified disapproval, the rabbit shook its head at the frog lazily nestled in panda pelt and innards.

The girls looked from the blue frog to the lavender rabbit. “Which one’s the bugaboo?” Clara whispered.

Beth still suspected it was the giant blue frog with the fangs and claws, but with the arrival of the lavender rabbit, all bets were off.

The frog noticed the rabbit and hopped to attention. Tendrils of damp panda stuffing hung from its left fang.

“Oh, *he* is, of course,” the rabbit demurred. “I am long since retired from the trenches.” The rabbit spoke in soothing, plummy tones, and his black button nose twitched with embarrassment. “Oh dear.” Glassy eyes studied Daisy’s corpse and the telltale stuffing lingering on froggy lips. “That *is* unfortunate,” the rabbit said, shaking its head. “He’s a novice, you see.”

The rabbit inclined its head to the girls. “A novice is someone very new to their job, someone who *obviously* does not yet know how things are done.” He glared, whip-like, at the distraught frog.

Beth remained speechless, her brain stuttering.

“He ate Daisy,” Clara blurted. “Mitch never eats Daisy.”

“Ah, but Mitch is an exemplary under-the-bed monster, whereas Quibby here...” The rabbit huffed. “Suffice it to say, I have doubts as to his suitability.”

The rabbit turned to the frog, who now looked thoroughly dismayed, its skin paling to a powdery blue. “Quibby, it is one thing to lurk under beds making grumbly noises and glowy eyes. That’s expected. Indeed, done properly, it is to be commended. But chasing the family around the house? Gobbling up a child’s beloved panda bear? Where does it stop? You go too far, Quibby.”

The rabbit addressed the table. “Allow me, ladies, to apologize for the terrible inconven... oh my.” The rabbit gasped. “Oh, my goodness, is it really? Could it be? Little Beth, isn’t it? I haven’t seen you in an age. How are you?”

Beth sputtered. “Well. Really well. Thank you.”

“All grown up now, I see.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You do remember me?”

Beth hesitated. “I think so.”

The rabbit sighed. “That is nice to hear. I sometimes wonder if we are not entirely ephemeral, creatures such as Quibby and I. Even the children forget us by light of day. It’s reassuring to know that we are not, perhaps, forever lost to those whom we have served.

“Well,” the rabbit went on, shaking off his sad air, “I do apologize. There’s been a terrible mix-up, you see.” From the folds of one plushy ear, it pulled a thin piece of paper and held it before the frog’s boggling eyes.

“Do you recognize this, Quibby? It is your invoice, is it not? Does it not say, ahem, ‘Please to be delivered, one bugaboo, electric blue, *no claws please*, to Apartment 4026B, Peachtree Park, Annalee Street, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. *B*, Quibby, *B!* And are we not now standing in Apartment *D?*’”

The frog shrugged, a sight Beth was sure she would find funny later.

“We are indeed standing in Apartment *D!* There is no demand for an under-the-bed bugaboo at this residence. There is, however, a boy down the stairs named Daniel Huffman, who no doubt has spent the night, poor child, wondering why has he no monster under his bed.

“And further, seeing the disgrace you’ve made of yourself here, I wonder if I shouldn’t send you back to HQ for reassessment...”

“Excuse me,” Beth said.

“Yes, dear?”

“This Quibby, he’s supposed to go to Daniel downstairs?”

“Yes, indeed. Are you acquainted with the boy? Bit of a rascal, I hear.”

“Oh, he is. He really, really is. Knowing Daniel the way I do and having now met Quibby, I can tell you, I think they’d be perfect for each other.”

The frog perked up.

“Hmm,” the rabbit said. “Quibby does have a certain vivacity that we suspected would

complement young Daniel's personality. And we are rarely mistaken about such things."

"Yeah. So, things didn't go well here. But Quibby wasn't supposed to be here, that was a mistake. Anybody can get an address wrong. Maybe you could give him a shot with Daniel? See how that works out?"

"My dear Beth, we monsters-under-the-bed must be ever ready to tailor our frights to each new assignment. We must be adaptable to all occasions and all patrons of our services. However, Quibby is new to the trade and has much to learn. Perhaps you're right."

The frog slobbered happily.

"Off with you, then," the rabbit said. "Under the bed and through the portal. It's much too late tonight, and the child will undoubtedly be asleep. And we've bothered these poor people enough for one evening."

The bugaboo, electric blue, shuffled off to the bedroom.

The rabbit swept into a low bow. "Again, ladies, my apologies to you all." He turned to follow the frog.

"Oh. Wait," Beth cried. "Mr. Winchester?"

The rabbit wheeled to face her with a look of pure delight. "Dear Beth, you *do* remember me. I confess, I suspected you were merely being polite. You were always such a polite child. I remember you well. 'Oh, please, Mr. Winchester, stop growling. Please, Mr. Winchester, don't hurt me.' And the occasional offering of a sacrificial cookie left on the floor near the bed. Ahh." The rabbit nodded. "Good times."

"Mr. Winchester, I do remember you. You look different."

"As do you, dear. Years change us all."

"I guess so. But if I remember correctly, you had teeth. Lots of big, scary teeth."

"Ah. Well, I still do. Somewhere." The rabbit smiled. "Bit unwieldy for everyday use, though."

"I suppose so. Mr. Winchester?"

"Yes?"

"I think I've missed you."

Tears filled the rabbit's eyes. "That does warm an old bugaboo's heart." With a fastidious glance at his furry chest, he added, "Or an approximation thereof."

From the folds of his ear he brandished a small square of linen, a handkerchief, and dabbed at his eyes. “It has indeed been a pleasure to see you, dear Beth. I fear that I may not have the pleasure again. Be well and be happy, and the next time you hear a low grumble in the darkness and wonder what it could have been, spare, if you can, a fond thought for me.”

Mr. Winchester tucked the handkerchief back into his ear and cleared his throat. “Now, I regret I must take my leave of you.” The rabbit hopped down the hall.

Beth jumped off the table and followed. The bedroom door was ajar, and she pushed it open. The dust ruffle at the near corner rustled. Beth said the familiar words, the bedtime liturgy she’d once forgotten.

“Good-night, Mr. Winchester.” She felt briefly nostalgic, remembering the nights of her childhood.

Claws like ivory knives lunged out, shredding the dust ruffle. From beneath the bed a lavender blaze rushed her like a solar flare. Beth shrieked and fell flat on her butt. From the mess in the corner, she grabbed a tennis racket and whacked the bugaboo bunny on the head.

Mr. Winchester chuckled, staggering into the shadows. “Good times,” he said. “Good-bye, Beth.”

With that, he slipped into the darkness, and from beneath the bed, Beth heard the muffled sound of a softly closing door.

Chandra Renais is a friendly, mild-mannered librarian by day, but on nights, weekends, and the occasional holiday she morphs into an aspiring writer and lunatic-general. She lives in North Carolina and enjoys Skee-ball, Halloween, and laughing. “Bugaboo, Electric Blue” is her first published story.