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Those without a home

My chances of victory are halved

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The Monster is a monster because the skin on its muzzle is all scribbled on with disease, its disproportionate limbs are fanned open around its body and its tattered wings transmit a sense of wretchedness that founders in pain. Seated on the ground with its back against the side of the phone kiosk, head lolling on its shoulder, it seems to have lost any awareness of existing. Perhaps it has been drinking or perhaps it is dying. Because the idea that at a certain point we die is constantly in the air. Of late, this thought has come to Fabrizio often and this is what he is thinking now that he sets eye on the Monster for the first time.

The Monster's body has lost consciousness against the phone kiosk outside Fabrizio's house. It is one of the last kiosks in town, so neglected there aren't even any obscenities written on it. The young man shivers. It is two o'clock in the morning, the gloomy light from the streetlamps illuminates the dirty snow piled up by the roadside. For a good half minute he stares at the Monster as it struggles, unconscious, for breath. However you look at it, there doesn't seem to be anyone in viale Dante Alighieri, where he has come to live a few months previously, after leaving his parents' home. Even the light from the fire station windows, even this light which normally encumbers the pavement opposite, is feeble and as if restrained. Fabrizio's eyes shift from the Monster's body to the sleepy residential street. Even the Christmas lights throw off a cold brightness,

and Fabrizio makes up his mind. He approaches the Monster, kneels down in the snow and slips an arm under the brown armpit. Then he hauls himself and the unwilling body upright. The weight isn't a problem, at least not at the start: it is the slimy things that tend to slip out of his grasp. But Fabrizio is decided and while one arm is wrapped around the Monster's torso, the other hand is pressed on its belly to keep it steady. The four-legged beast (Monster+Fabrizio) crosses the few metres of pavement that separate the phone kiosk from the entrance to the building where the young man lives. Fumbling with the keys, he unlocks the glass door and goes with the body he has taken charge of into the all-marble entrance. For the first time at the end of this anything-butgood day, Fabrizio smiles: his mouth curls upwards at the thought of the slush invading the marble and the complaints that a disagreeable neighbour will shower on him the next day. The young man has always wanted to obliterate himself from the world. He'd like to live a quiet life. Instead, every event is fraught with friction and he has argued with the disagreeable neighbour almost every day since he has been in the flat in viale Dante Alighieri. Not that Fabrizio has ever done anything in particular apart from being unbearably young. The disagreeable neighbour has made up his own reasons for quarrelling right from the start. So that in the end, unable to avoid the war, Fabrizio has welcomed the war and started being rude and behaving badly as often as possible. There's dedication in it. He doesn't stop smiling at the slush making its way onto the marble.

The four-legged beast goes up the entrance steps, reaches the lift landing and presses the button. The lift comes, Fabrizio slides the Monster's body in and realizes there's no room for himself. He thinks for a second,

presses two and whips his arm out to avoid blocking the closing door. He takes the stairs two at a time to get to the floor first - a wasted effort, the Sixties lift is slow and its pulleys creak. But Fabrizio is an anxious sort, always has been. When the lift door opens he looks the unconscious Monster in the face, reaches out (the position of the body is identical to when it was lying up against the phone kiosk) and straightens out one of its legs so that it falls between the photoelectric sensors. He goes to throw his front door open and comes back to get the Monster. He drags it along, leaving it prostrate in the corridor and goes into the bathroom to get a cloth to clean the landing. Fabrizio doesn't want to make it too obvious that the slush in the entrance and lift is his doing. If you are obviously guilty you can't sustain a bitter row successfully. You would have to be completely irrational, which he isn't. Instead he prepares the battleground for a reasonable conflict. The neighbour will accuse him and he will be able to deny.

When at last he is back in his flat, has turned the lock three times and seen the Monster again, he thinks: all right, but what am I going to do with the Monster now?

Fabrizio decides it is best to take precautions. Everything he knows about monsters, what little he knows, comes from films and a few books. He doesn't know how much of it is true, but in the end there is only one lesson and it's always the same: monsters are dangerous.

So Fabrizio seats the unconscious body up against the kitchen wall before proceeding to tie it up. Tying up a body is precisely one of those things that is easy to do only in films and books. Where do they get all those ropes from? In reality there's never any rope available. Which is why Fabrizio has to go out onto the kitchen balcony and cut the nylon

twine running along it that until now has been used for hanging out the washing. Back in the kitchen, with effort he joins the wrists (wrists?) of the Monster's disproportionate slimy limbs and ties them together. Two more cords wind around a shoulder and one around the thighs, the last one is for the ankles (ankles?). One thing reassures Fabrizio as he is tying up the Monster: the regular breathing he hears in its lungs. The Monster's regular breathing fills him with an oceanic calm. The ragged wings remain free.

A clock chimes. The neighbour's pendulum clock uses Fabrizio's flat as a sounding board. It must be half past two.

While waiting to decide whether to try and resuscitate the Monster or wait to see what happens, as they say, the young man remembers the Scarecrow Competition. The following day Nibbiano will be holding its winter scarecrow competition (the snowman's competition is held in mid August. How will they imitate a snowman at the height of summer, without the snow? But that's a different competition, a different problem, this is another matter. On the other hand though, who needs a scarecrow in December?). By ten in the morning you have to be there with your scarecrow, pay the enrolment fee at the stall and go through the streets of the village until you find a place you like to leave it in. The scarecrow can be any shape and made of any material. There is only one condition: it has to be self-standing. The village teeming with scarecrows popping up out of the snow. The village that celebrates all day: everyone eats together, there are the Christmas stands, you listen to music, and when the sun sets the jury reunites and appoints the first three winners.

Fabrizio goes into the bedroom to get the coat stand. Monsters, he thinks, mustn't get in the way of our plans. Monsters have no right to send away

those who are not monstrous at all. And the coat stand is the closest thing to a scarecrow he has in the house. It is brass and dented here and there. If anything should happen to it, it won't be a great loss. He takes off the jacket hanging there and throws it on the bed, lifts the coat stand and takes it into the kitchen. He hasn't got any clear ideas about what he wants to do. The Monster hasn't moved. It is breathing against the wall and every so often it gasps, but less than it did in the street, half an hour ago. The young man takes from its corner the shelf he never put up over the radiator. He never put it up because he hasn't got a drill. He looks at it. The first thing to do would be to cut it lengthwise to get two arms to fix across the coat stand at the top, so as to form a Latin cross. Because, if you look at crosses, you can see how much you can build on them. Constructions, symbols, stories of humanity, scarecrows. For the moment, at least, the story of the construction of the scarecrow ends here.

Fabrizio takes a shower and comes out of the bathroom. His muscles are toned by the warm night water and his skin is perfumed. As he puts his pyjamas on the neighbour's pendulum clock strikes three. The whole time he is under the shower his imagination has been conjuring up an even more savage version of Psycho's most famous scene: Anthony Perkins/Norman Bates has been replaced by the Monster that has freed itself and burst in, while he has replaced Janet Leigh/Marion Crane. There is no need for a long knife because the brutal blows from the Monster's paws have thrown him to the ground, crushing his chest and mutilating his face, not without pain. Fabrizio is resigned to the idea of leaving the beast alone in the kitchen. After all, what else could he have done? Perhaps

it would have been better to take it back into the street, but no better than bringing it into the house. And any action needs to wait patiently for its outcome before being evaluated. Anyway after a day that had been anything but good, a shower was absolutely necessary.

The young man goes to the storage room at the end of the corridor, lifts the curtain that acts as a door and goes in to get the toolbox his father lent him a month earlier and that he hasn't found a need for yet. He goes into the kitchen, where the Monster seems not to have moved. At last he decides to get cracking on the scarecrow. He takes the shelf he has never put up and places it on the granite kitchen surface where he normally eats, in search of the best position to saw it in. He wants to split it in two lengthwise to make the scarecrow's arms. After a couple of tries, he positions it so that it sticks out from the unit. Holding it steady with the palm of his left hand, he grips the bow saw in his right and starts making a notch to indicate where he will start sawing. After a couple of tries where the blade gets stuck, Fabrizio manages to get a constant rhythm going and soon he has got the arms of his scarecrow. He raises them to eye level and considers them for a moment before turning his gaze towards the Monster that is struggling for breath in reply. As it gasps, its eyelids (eyelids?) flutter like whiskers. The effort of eyes used to staying shut.

Seeing as he doesn't have a drill but needs to make holes in the ends of the scarecrow's arms-to-be, to then connect them to the trunk-to-be (the brass coat stand, dented here and there), Fabrizio digs a long iron nail and a hammer out of the toolbox. He puts one of the halves of the shelf back on the granite top, the other stays on the floor, and starts planting the nail. He stops at the second blow: the Monster seems to be reacting

to these dry sounds and the death rattle rising from its throat is getting louder. Immobile, hammer in hand, Fabrizio looks at the Monster. The gasping dies down again, then suddenly its jaw snaps open to reveal a rack of teeth that are all, without exclusion, sharp canines. With each breath, the Monster's dark heavy tongue gives a start. Fascinated by the sight of the gaping mouth, the young man does not move until the beast swallows and shuts it again, letting itself go once more. About a minute passes without anything happening. The Monster's eyelids have stopped trembling and Fabrizio gives another couple of blows of the hammer. Then he stops and bends down to search the toolbox for a pair of pliers to pull the nail out. He wants to knock it in again beside the first hole to widen it up a bit. And it is while he is here, bending over his father's toolbox in search of a pair of pliers, in his kitchen, a scarecrow in the making, before half past three strikes, a Monster unconscious against the wall, it is while these are the circumstances, that someone knocks loudly at the door, repeatedly, flat handedly, one would say.

Fabrizio opens up. Framed in the doorway, the disagreeable neighbour emerges in the background of the dim landing. From the doorway, a fraction of a second after Fabrizio has opened up, the neighbour assails him, striking him in the chest, eyes mad with rage and shouting: "What the hell do you think you're doing? It's three o'clock in the morning, for Christ's sake". So saying, he pushes forward with his body, knocks Fabrizio out of the way and plunges into the kitchen. So it is the neighbour, fifty-odd and fit, who is the first to meet the gaze of the Monster, at last fully awake. "Christ", says the man again, stopping suddenly. The blood in his veins, his muscles, even his lungs, all turned

to stone. Snarling, the beast breaks the pathetic nylon cords. A second later it is on top of him and there is bloodshed. As its heavy paws claw the man's shoulders it sinks its muzzle into his chest, snapping his sternum with its teeth. It gets up again and aims for the jugular, but the heat of the moment and the hours spent in a daze hamper its accuracy and it ends by clamping its jaw onto the man's face, which crumples up with a cry of pain. This soon stops though, replaced by a strangled gurgling that is rapidly extinguished by the blood. Meanwhile, Fabrizio has no option but to turn and look on helplessly. Now that the Monster has completed its bloodbath and is crouching greedily over the neighbour's body, Fabrizio can shut his eyes, like a frightened child.

Soon there is silence. The young man opens his eyes again and goes back into the kitchen. His sense of bewilderment mounts. There is no Monster, and even less the aftermath of a broken body. Just his scarecrow waiting to be finished.

Later, when the pendulum clock next door strikes four, Fabrizio stretches his neck muscles. He runs his rough tongue over his teeth as if feeling them in his mouth for the first time. Finally, at this point in time, his eyes have become enormous and this story is at an end. A happy ending, no doubt about that.