"Monsters" by Anna Quindlen

THE monster under the bed finally arrived at our house the other night. I've been waiting for him to show up for four years. Peter Rabbit had been read, discussed, analyzed and placed nearby for easy access. The little brother was coiled under his blankets, waiting to leap out and seize forbidden tow trucks and alphabet blocks as soon as the sound of the parents' footsteps had faded to a faint thump. The bathtub faucet was drip drip dripping in the next room. The drinks of water had been parceled out, demanded again, refused. The overhead light was off. The night light gleamed.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"I have something very important to tell you."

"What?"

"There is a monster under my bed."

Do you have any idea how close I came to replying, "Well, it's about time"?

It seems that the monster showed up under my bed just the day before yesterday. I always thought he was a hairy beast with a lot of teeth, a cross between Godzilla and a Gahan Wilson drawing. He never got me, but that was because I was quick and brave and careful. After I finished reading in bed, I would go across to the switch next to the door and turn out the light. Then I would hoist my nightgown up to my knobby knees, take a deep breath, run three steps and leap up onto the mattress. Don't break stride, don't look down - those were my rules of survival. I knew that if I had eyes in my chin I'd see a long nasty arm whipping out to grab me by the ankle and pull me under. Beneath the bedspread I was safe. One more night alive.

What did I tell my son about his monster? Something lame, I think, like, "Would Daddy and I let monsters in this house?" Followed by a rambling discussion of things that are there and things you only think are there and their relative dangers and merits. (The last time we had this discussion it was because he didn't want to sleep in the top bunk. "The things on the ceiling go in my ears," he said. "Honey, those are shadows," I replied. Long explanation about shadows, how shadows form, the benign nature of shadows. The next night he still did not want to sleep in the top bunk. "The shadows on the ceiling go in my ears." Fast learner.)

I knew what I was supposed to say and do. I was supposed to say there aren't any monsters under the bed and then get down on my hands and knees and peer underneath and get him to join me for confirmation and solace. That doesn't do a bit of good, because monsters come back as soon as the lights are doused, as any child knows. And anyway, I couldn't bring myself to flatly deny the monster. I have a lot of trouble with those rare times when, for good reason, I lie to my children. I've been tormented, for instance, by Santa Claus. In every other case, I speak the truth: do all people die? Will the needle hurt? Do you love Christopher? Yes. Yes. Yes. Then one day, in the service of centuries of tradition, I unequivocally confirm that a fat man is coming down the chimney to leave toys, eat the cookies, drink the milk and get to Cousin Kate's house 40 miles away before daybreak. I understand why I do this: I'm not one of those modern moms with angular etchings on my walls who thinks Santa is an irrational vestige of anachronistic religious festivals. But it feels funny, telling my son that Santa is real when he isn't, and knowing that my son will find out someday that he isn't.

That's why I can't deny the monster, why I can't tell him that nothing is under the bed. I believe in monsters, and someday my son will believe in them even more surely than he does now. Like most mothers, my mother lied. My mother once even put a dust ruffle on the bed. Can you imagine? Giving aid and sustenance to the monsters! That lasted three days. When you grow up, you realize that there isn't any Santa, but the monsters are still around. If only they were still big and hairy; now, they're dark and amorphous, and they're no longer afraid of the light. Sometimes they're the guy who climbs in the window and steals your television. Sometimes they're the guy who walks out the front door with your heart in his hand and never comes back. Sometimes they're the job or the bank or the wife or the husband or the boss or that dark, heavy feeling that sits between your shoulder blades like a backpack. You learn that there are always terrible things waiting to grab you by the ankle, to pull you under, to get you with their long, horrible arms. And you lie in bed and look at the shadows on the ceiling and feel, under the covers, just for a moment, that you're safe. One more day alive.

I'm feeling my way with my son's monster, now that the beast has finally arrived. I should have had an answer for this one all cooked up, but then I wouldn't be a mom - I'd be a magician. Maybe I should make a game out of it. Tame the monster. Give him a name and some habits and maybe even a family. Leave a Tootsie Roll pop on the floor to buy the monster's friendship. (The little brother, wild as a punk haircut, will be out of bed and unwrapping that sucker before the parents make it to the first landing.) Or maybe this is one of those times when I should leave the boy to his own devices. After all, some things you get taught. And some things you just learn.