

This is T. J. Berg's first appearance in TOTU, probably her second published story. You wouldn't guess that from the story. It is accomplished, involving, and genuinely creepy.

The Danger of Her Muse

by T. J. Berg

“When you believe a thing, believe in it all the way.”

--Walt Disney

“If they take all the lollipops out of my head, how will I tempt the children in?”

Joseph dropped the book he was picking up, startled. He swept his hair out of his eyes as he turned, jumped. Helen stood barely a foot away. She leaned across the space and planted a kiss on his forehead. Her face was pinched.

“What did you just say?” he asked her.

Two lines creased the skin between her eyebrows, and she squinted at him as if it hurt to have her eyes open. “I...” she trailed off, pressed her hand against her face, running her fingers over closed eyes.

“Helen?”

“I was saying I think I’ll hit the hay early.”

“Headache?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you take something?”

“Never helps.”

Joseph clasped his wife’s hand, rubbing gently, running his finger along their wedding ring. The headaches had started after the miscarriage. *It’s the thing growing again, the thing that took my baby*, Helen had said once, hands pressed over her eyes, face drained of color, voice flat. It was another part of the depression that gripped her after losing the baby, just like the Green Monkey comics. At least she’d taken a break from *those* while their niece Katie was visiting—she didn’t want to risk Katie seeing the illustrations. Joseph could barely handle looking at them himself, let alone a ten year old who had only read her Month Books.

“I’ll be in a minute.” He raised his eyebrows meaningfully at the mess on the floor. “Let me just finish picking up after Katie.” Somehow in the hour before

he’d taken Katie to the airport, she’d managed to pull down every book Helen had written and illustrated—as if she wouldn’t be back in a few months. He wondered if she knew that her visits to Aunt Helen weren’t going to stop unless her dad suddenly stopped needing to take “business trips” that involved young red-heads.

Joseph gave Helen’s hand a little squeeze. Her fingers lingered in his a moment before she pulled free and walked away, slippers scuffing against the carpet. He watched her until she turned down the hall, then rubbed a chocolate thumbprint from *The Yellow Voice of April*. He returned *April* and *If I May* to the shelves, straightened the sofa’s armrest covers and pillows, gave one dissatisfied look at the carpet, and decided he’d have to finish cleaning in the morning. It was time for bed.

As he turned down the hallway, he saw light streaming out of Helen’s office. He paused long enough to hear the clicking of the keyboard.

He poked his head around the door. The words “clones” and “green monkey” flew by on the screen. They grabbed him by the stomach and twisted.

Resisting the urge to put the cuff of his sleeve in his mouth and chew, he said, “I thought you had a headache, hon?” Helen swiveled her chair so hard the armrest slammed into the wooden desk.

“What? Just because I have a headache I can’t get a little work done?”

“No, it’s just...” He averted his gaze to the floor, not wanting to see the illustrations on her workbench. “I just don’t think this Green Monkey stuff is good for you. You know that.”

“Yes, you’ve made it quite clear what you think.” Her voice was shrill, both angry and exhausted.

“I know, it’s just that—”

“That you don’t believe me when I say that I *have* to write these, that I don’t know where these stories