

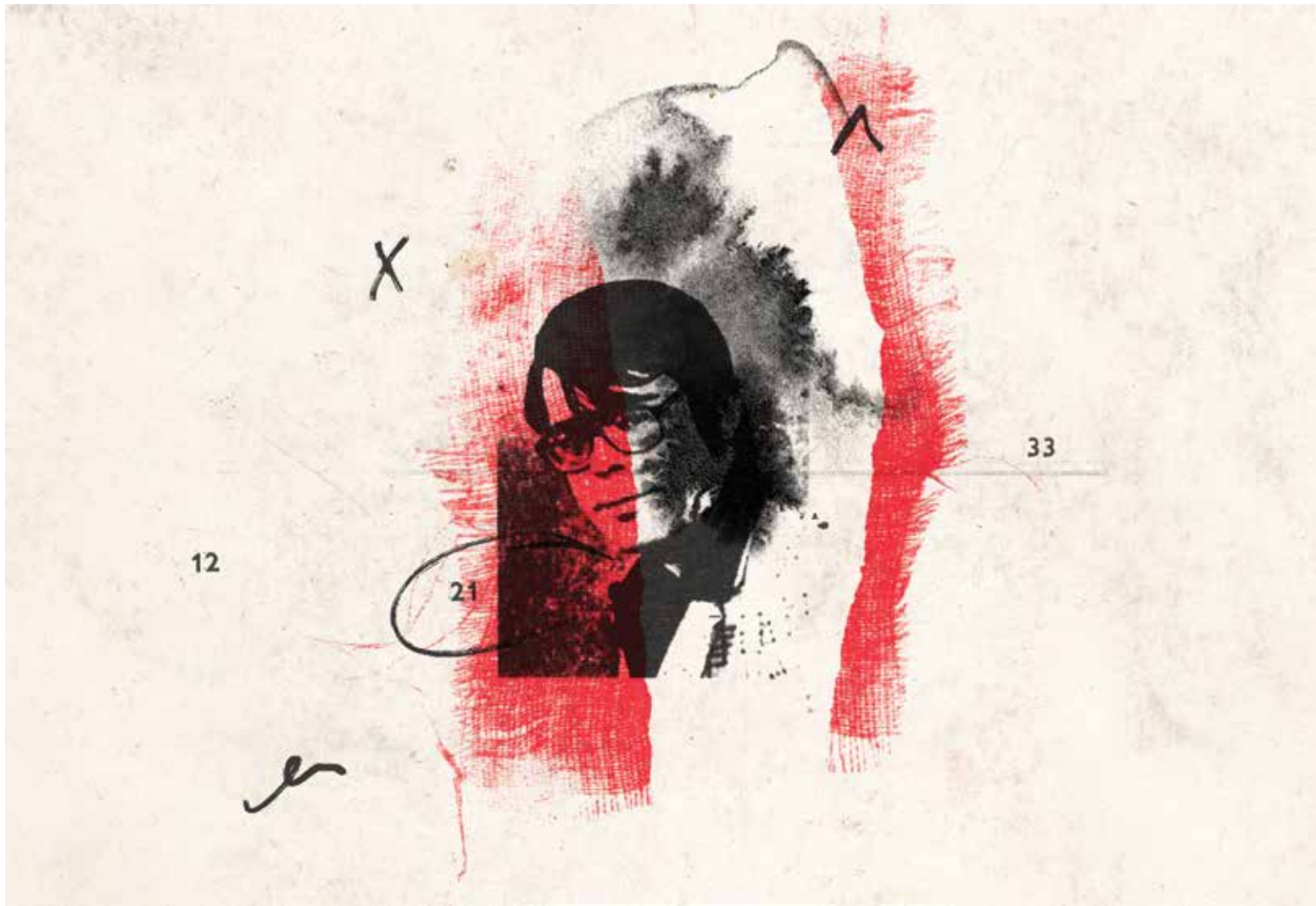
Essay

Facing the Boogeyman

I spent a year in Stephen King’s archives and discovered the real-life fears that inspired his fiction

By *Caroline Bicks*

ILLUSTRATION by LAURA SCOTT



I first encountered Stephen King at the public library in Castine, Maine, in 1979. I was 12 and had never read any horror fiction before, but I was drawn to the cover of *Night Shift*, his first collection of short stories. It featured a hand half-wrapped in gauze with eyes on its fingers and palm, staring out at me. That was scary, but it was the sixth tale, “The Boogeyman”, that stoked my deepest fears: Lester Billings is telling his psychiatrist about his three small children who, one by one, had been killed in their cribs by a monster living in their bedroom closet. By the end of the story, it’s clear that Lester’s negligence and cowardice put them all in harm’s way, and that his wife was helpless (or absent) when the monster came for them.

I’d been an anxious little kid who stuck close to my mother and to familiar places whenever possible. “The Boogeyman” exploded the equation I’d clung to in those early days and tucked away in my subconscious for safekeeping as I got older: mom + home = security.

And yet I continued to devour King’s stories and to let a posse of his monsters shamle into my imagination: the woman in Room 217, Danny Glick scratching at the window, little Gage Creed, covered in his own grave-dirt, coming for his mommy. But the Boogeyman reigned supreme. I still can’t sleep next to an open closet.

Forty years after my first fearful encounter with the Boogeyman, I left Boston to take the job of Stephen E. King Chair in Literature at the master of horror’s alma mater, the University of Maine in Orono. The English department was looking for a Shakespearean (which I am); and the chair (endowed by the Harold Alfond Foundation) came with a public humanities mission that I cared about and a fund to support it. I was told not to expect any contact with the man after whom the chair had been named.

Then, four years and one terrifying pandemic later, he rang me at home: “Caroline, it’s Steve King.” He thought it was time we met.

After I recovered from the shock of getting cold called by my literary idol, I invited him to come to speak with our students, and he agreed. When the day arrived, and I saw him pulling into the English department parking lot, I was fully starstruck. But he put me at ease right away. The same was true with the students: it was magical to see their eyes light up over their Covid-19-mandated masks as he answered all their questions with patience, thoughtfulness, and humour. I couldn’t believe that this was the same man who had scared generations of readers (including me) out of their minds.

A year after that, I was about to start a sabbatical leave. I asked King and his wife, Tabitha, if I could spend it in their personal archives, which were newly collected in a climate-controlled space attached to their home in nearby Bangor. I wanted to study the early drafts of those iconic 1970s books that had scared me so badly when I was a kid: *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *’Salem’s Lot*, *Night Shift* and *Pet Sematary*. I was eager to discover how he had crafted and revised those horrible monsters and moments. Part of me also wondered (maybe hoped): what if I could lessen their grip on my inner child by dissecting them with my grown-up English professor brain?

Over the year I spent embedded with King’s manuscripts, tracking the changes he made to them, and talking to him about his choices, I discovered a more complicated truth. From my now middle-aged vantage point, I glimpsed grief at the heart of his scariest stories and the fear of losing what you love: your child, your mother, your ideals. I began to see how, draft to draft, his language resonated with these real and imagined experiences of loss – his, as well as ours.

KING’S FATHER LEFT HIS WIFE, RUTH, AND THEIR two sons, David and Steve, when King was just two years old. He never saw him again. They moved around the country for the next nine years while Ruth worked to keep them afloat. She always made time for trips to the library, though, and for supporting her youngest son’s dream of becoming a writer.

In 1966, King left his home and mother in Durham, Maine, to enrol at the state’s flagship university, 120 miles away. Like so many young people navigating this stage, he arrived with one set of beliefs and graduated with another four years later. During this time, Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the Vietnam war had left 60,000 US soldiers and two million Vietnamese dead or missing, and race riots were taking place across the country. Weeks before he graduated, the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State student protesters and wounded nine others. King’s politics moved decidedly to the left as he took part in anti-war protests on campus and experienced these national traumas.

At the same time, he was having fun. He was partying, and falling in love (he met Tabitha, today an accomplished novelist in her own right, in the UMaine library). He developed his writing chops in his classes, in informal poetry workshops, and in his weekly column, “The Garbage Truck”, that he wrote for the Maine Campus newspaper. The column is a rich collection of King’s musings on everything from pop culture and classic literature, to his hopes for youth-generated political change and his fear for the future of America.

In one instalment, he describes getting punched by a fraternity boy while taking part in a peaceful campus protest. The student-on-student violence stirs up conflicting emotions: he wants to hit somebody and to weep. He compares the group of belligerent frat boys to the Gestapo “burning books and Jews. I do not see political belief. I only see terrible, amoral castration.” He ends by imagining the fearful future that awaits his hypothetical child: “Will my son have to kill someone in the name of national pride?”

It was during his college years that King wrote some of the stories that would end up in his first collection, *Night Shift*. Starting my archival work, I was curious to see if King’s fiction writing at the time registered his hopes and fears during this stage – one that he would later describe as a difficult “transition from boyhood to manhood”.

He published one of the stories, “Night Surf”, in *Ubris*, the undergraduate literary magazine. A precursor to his apocalyptic novel *The Stand*, the tale centres on a group of college students

who have survived a pandemic and are burning a man alive because they’re bored. In the version King wrote when he was an undergraduate – when, I discovered by reading the campus paper, a deadly worldwide flu pandemic was actually affecting UMaine’s campus – he includes an exchange between two of the students, Needles and Bernie. Needles insists that the guy they burned didn’t feel anything. Bernie pushes back, asking, “Then why did we do it like that? We could have shot him.” Bernie’s question seems to have some effect on Needles: “If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn’t do it again.” King removes this ethical push-me-pull-you from his final version, published a decade later. The young people appear to feel nothing.

In a 2016 essay looking back on his time as an undergraduate, King recalls feeling “a sense of dull disillusionment and loss” when he and his peers started to concede to convention and give up on the belief that they could change the world. As I worked my way through early drafts of other *Night Shift* stories, I saw that they all bore traces of the moral struggles and cognitive dissonance the young King had chronicled in his columns—and that, as with “Night Surf”, he muted or deleted them in later drafts, as those years (and the ideals that fuelled them) fell further away in his rear-view mirror.

In the published version of “Children of the Corn”, for example, the protagonist Burt is murdered, along with his wife, Vicky, by a group of killer teenagers in a Nebraska cornfield. The kids are portrayed as inhumane monsters, and Burt only uses violence in self-defence when they brutally attack him. But in the unpublished first draft that’s in the archives, entitled just “The Children”, Burt takes sick pleasure in attacking the boys. They appear as exuberant youths, not cold-blooded killers. King describes Burt as having been “a conscientious objector” when he was in college, but now “he kicked the sixteen-year-old... in the balls with great enthusiasm.”

Burt’s adult appetite for violence speaks to two of King’s undergraduate concerns: that he and his classmates would lose their youthful ideals; and that older generations would inflict “terrible, amoral castration” on future ones. By the time he revised the story for publication, it seems, new fears were informing his fiction.

WITHIN TWO YEARS OF GRADUATING, KING’S worries shifted from the future that might be awaiting him and his hypothetical son to the present challenges he and Tabitha were facing as they raised their two small children. The young couple were living in a rented trailer in Hermon, Maine, and struggling to make ends meet. Tabitha was working at Dunkin’ Donuts, and King was teaching at Hamden Academy, making \$6,400 a year, while trying to make more from the short stories he was typing at night. In 1973, he wrote “The Boogeyman” and sold it to *Cavalier* magazine.

When it came time for me to face that particular monster in the archives, I asked King what had inspired the story that had scared me so badly when I was 12. (He gets a version of that question a

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lot, and isn't a fan of it; but, in this case, I couldn't resist.) He began with a pragmatic response: "We needed money to pay the rent, so I needed a story." But then he revealed a bit more: "Always being in touch with my fears, and two little ones, Naomi and Joe, I was very worried about crib death. I imagine the story came out of that. If there was a more specific ignition point, I don't remember it. Stories are like dreams: they are clear, then they melt like cotton candy."

His answer exposed a fear that was excruciatingly personal to him in 1973. At the same time, it spoke to something universal: the role that scary stories play in helping us process our fears as they evolve across our lifespan. Twelve-year-old me and 25-year-old King were experiencing his story from two different points on the same human timeline: vulnerable kid and scared parent. The boogeyman might melt like cotton candy, but he always comes back in a different form, shape-shifting to fit our changing fears of losing what we love.

King chose to end *Night Shift* with "The Woman in the Room", a story (unlike most of the others in the collection) that he didn't try to sell during those

lean years. It's a thinly veiled portrait of the real-life trauma he had recently experienced: the loss of his mother to cancer. (Ruth died in December 1973, just months before the life-changing publication of his first novel, *Carrie*, although she lived long enough to know that he'd sold it.) The narrator, Johnny, is watching his mother die of the same disease and struggles with whether or not to give her a lethal dose of opioids and put her out of her misery. Although King didn't help his mother die (as Johnny ultimately does), he was at Ruth's bedside when she did.

The archives hold one early draft of the story. At some point, King crossed out the original title, "The Last of Her", and wrote a new one above it in pencil: "Time in a Glass that Ran". The title he'd finally land on – "The Woman in the Room" – strikes me as a thoughtful middle ground between the first one – with its anatomising attention on the dying mother's remains – and the emotionless abstraction of the second.

'The Woman in the Room' is a thinly veiled portrait of his trauma over the loss of his mother to cancer

Both this version and the final published one begin the same way: "The question is, can he do it?" – meaning, will Johnny help his mother die? I recognise echoes here of the ethical questions that King's other *Night Shift* characters grapple with in his early drafts: What do I believe in? And who will I become? Throughout the story, Johnny struggles with that "painful transition from boyhood to manhood" that King would describe when reflecting back on this time.

The early draft includes details about Johnny's mother's life before she was his mom. As he looks at her long fingers, he recalls her early dreams of being a concert pianist: "She played herself through a New York music conservatory on scholarship." Ruth had similar ambitions. King tells me that when he was very young and they were moving around a lot after his father left, she would drive to Croton-on-Hudson every Sunday to play for a radio-broadcast church service.

In the final draft, King replaces this back-story with a memory of when Johnny was 12 and he found his grandmother's lifeless body (an event that mirrors King's own discovery of his grandma when he was 15). When Johnny sees her lying dead still in her bed, he calls out for his mother. The new episode deepens the story's focus on the losses and fears we all face as we navigate our way into adulthood. But it also underscores how a loving adult – if you are very lucky – can help you through these difficult rites of passage.

IN 1991, WHEN HE WAS ASKED TO CONTRIBUTE a story to an anthology of horror stories, King selected "The Woman in the Room" – out of the scores of supernatural ones he had to choose from at that point. In his author's note to this edition, he describes how crafting it was a therapeutic act, and how "our best stories" continue to help us metabolise our grief: "When my mother's dying was done, I wrote this story," he explains. "I have never enjoyed re-reading it, but at times I do... because my mother's death was part of my life. And, you know, writing it made me feel better. If there is a stronger justification for the reading and writing of stories, I haven't found it."

Of all the lessons I learnt about King's process and the relationship between fear and great writing during my year in his personal archives, this was for me the most profound. I'd tracked and analysed King's monsters; I'd even held his original "Boogeyman" pages to the light and seen the typewritten impressions pushing out of their backs. But I didn't feel any less scared by the words on the page. Monsters, King writes, "stand in for all the things we fear in our real lives" – traumas that shine with a "terrible brilliance". An artfully crafted horror story is a filter, a way to face what otherwise would blind you.

The Boogeyman never goes away. Grief and loss will come for you eventually. But sometimes, for a brief moment, a really good story can help you feel better about all that. **FT**

Caroline Bicks is the author of *Monsters in the Archives: My Year of Fear with Stephen King* published by Random House

