



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2019

Article 2

5-22-2019

The Hug Monster

Ryan Sipple

Gettysburg College, sippry01@gettysburg.edu

Class of 2021

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Sipple, Ryan (2019) "The Hug Monster," *The Mercury*: Year 2019, Article 2.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2019/iss1/2>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Hug Monster

Author Bio

Ryan Sipple is a sophomore majoring in Political Science and English from Felton, Delaware, which is remarkably a fairly decent place.

The Hug Monster

RYAN SIPPLE

“Look me in the eye, Ihsan.”

Normally, after school Ihsan would at least have an hour of relative peace, since her mother worked until 4:00 and her father was usually passed out in the living room when she was dropped off from elementary school. First grade was hard and loud and too many classmates touched her; she hid from them in the bushes during recess and was forced out by the playground monitor. That caused a meltdown. But Ihsan was home now, and she could finally hug Flacco, the fluffiest, comfiest, cuddliest dog in all the world, and curl up against the carpet to take a very, very long nap.

But her mother was home early today. The onslaught had begun.

“You heard me, Ihsan. Look me in the eye.”

Why must we do these endless drills? Why does Mama want to see my eyes so bad? I hate looking at her eyes - anybody's eyes. She knows that. Eye contact makes my face boil and sting like rats scurrying across my cheeks and between my skin and bones. Why do you make me hurt so much, Mama? Why do you want this?

All this and more Ihsan thought in between her mother's questions, her eyes darting between her shoes. Just one of the many drills Ihsan's mother and “therapist” subjected her to. Make eye contact, hug Mama and Papa, talk to the therapist and listen to his inane questions, even though the sound of his voice scrapes against the ears like sandpaper against a baby's crying face. All to make Ihsan more presentable, more agreeable. More normal.

“Look me in the eye, Ihsan. I won't ask again.”

Some days Ihsan could cope with this unrelenting pressure, or at least accept it quietly until her mother finally stopped and let her take solace in her room. But this day Ihsan could take no more.

Just as Ihsan's mother moved to grab her daughter's face, forcing eye contact as she has done so often before, Ihsan cried out a warrior's shriek and slammed her hands against her mother. She whipped her arm back to catch Ihsan, but she was gone, speeding down the hallway and out the sliding glass door. Without a hat, without a coat, without even a pair of shoes, Ihsan bolted through the backyard, running without regard for direction or physical limitation. Her mother was shouting from the sliding glass door, but Ihsan was far too awash in the flood of emotions to make her words out clearly. Ihsan had no destination but forward and no purpose except to run far away.

She was not immediately pursued. Maybe Ihsan's mother was more concerned with putting on shoes than chasing her daughter into the woods, or maybe she was already calling the police; both were possible. Eventually Ihsan's sheer force of will was forced to give way to the realities of oxygen, and she collapsed on the edge of the woods, not far behind her house. Ihsan, of course, was never trusted in the woods, not even with her parents, but she loved to gaze between the pines whenever she helped let Flacco out into the backyard. In the fall, when wind storms made the trees dance like bowling pins ready to strike the ground, they were all Ihsan would stare at, sinking into their world. She was about to do so once more, far more dramatically.

Ihsan could hear the rushing water even from the edge of the woods, and her throat ached with equal parts thirst and exhaustion. As best she could, she slipped between the trees, looming far above her tiny head, and followed the rushing, its rhythmic flow calming her overloaded mind. At last she came to the river, which was much smaller than she was hoping, but the water seemed perfectly refreshing. Ihsan pressed her body against the water-front, lapping the water into her hands and against her face, basking in the sharp punch of the water's coolness. Had she not laid onto the shaky dirt part of the riverbed, she might not have fallen. But she did, and without warning the dirt gave way beneath her, and she splashed into the river. If only she could swim.

As she sank beneath the whirling waters, Ihsan felt all the senses that pricked and prodded at her lift away, like arms pulling away from a much too lengthy hug. While others would have grasped for air, Ihsan let the river envelop her, the watery blanket wrapping around her, tighter and yet far more warmly than any of the hugs she had ever been subjected to. Just when she was ready to go to sleep in this all-encompassing blanket, she felt teeth wrap themselves around her leg, pulling her towards the surface with surprisingly little force. The last thing she saw before her eyes fell shut was the sunken face of a miserable creature.

Ihsan was awakened by a piercing screech. She was lying face down in a grass clearing, the rush of water still lurking in the background, but more distantly than before. The grass felt not unlike Flacco's wonderful coat of fur, but the shrieking forced her to pull away and sit upright, to stop that terrible noise. She opened her eyes and found herself sitting face to face with the monster. A more miserable creature she had never seen before, except perhaps in the mirror during her meltdowns.

The monster was lanky and flimsy-looking; his skin barely fit loosely over his bones. He was much taller than Ihsan, and probably taller than her mother, but he was sitting down, legs crossed, swinging his body back and

forth and tearing his bony fingers into the dirt, digging deep into the soil. He had two equally dismal mouths: one a small pair of lips on his face sewn shut into an eternal frown, the other a giant maw encompassing the whole top of his head, screaming wide open but saying nothing. Worst of all were his eyes, downcast, barely open, and red raw from painful crying. Most people would have been horrified at the sight of such of a monster, yet Ihsan was enraptured. The eyes, the rocking, the clawing at the ground: she recognized them all within herself. Does he feel as alone as I do?

Ihsan scooted across the dirt, moving slowly towards the monster. At first he recoiled, throwing himself onto his back and sprawling backwards, dragging his fingers against the soil. Ihsan couldn't find the speech to comfort the monster and show her compassion for him, but she held her hands out and signed the words for "happy" and "hug." The monster didn't seem to understand sign language, but his eyes grew slightly brighter watching Ihsan move her hands with such passion, and he stopped pulling back. Soon the two were nearly touching knees, both shaking in the cold.

Ihsan opened her arms once again, leaning into the monster. She could feel the monster seize up in surprise, but soon he wrapped his arms around her in return. Despite his lanky limbs, the monster's hug was amazingly warm and comforting, second only to the fabulous Flacco in comfiness. The monster's shrieks gave way to soft breathing as his top mouth eased shut. His rocking slowed and matched Ihsan's own rhythm as the two, the girl and the monster, found peace.

At least until the fairy flew in.

Ihsan didn't like the look of the fairy from the moment he flew into the clearing. Sure, he was cute, in that generic archetypal style that the public imagines fairies to be. He was very tiny, barely the size of one of the monster's fingers, and he flitted from place to place like sparks from a candle, but Ihsan could see the fire in his eyes and the contempt in his smile.

"What are you doing with this little thing, ya big ugly brute?" the fairy asked, smirking as he weaved between the monster's legs and sauntered onto his shoulder. The monster's low hum already began rising to the shrieks of before.

"What's the matter? Little ol' fairy's got you scared, now? I ain't doing anything scary!" The fairy buzzed and twirled around the monster's ears and buzzing louder each cycle, stumbling around the monster's head like a drunken, belligerent gnat. To Ihsan, that's all he was.

"STOP!"

The fairy froze, hovering stunned in between Ihsan and the monster. The monster's cries at once faltered.

"Stay away from my friend, you mean awful fly!" Before either the fairy or Ihsan could totally realize it, Ihsan had grabbed a handful of rocks

from the ground and started hurling them at the fairy. As best as he tried to dodge them, too many for his comfort struck home. Shouting curses and profanities along the way, the fairy, hobbled but alive, flew off into the distance, never to bother the monster again.

The sky was dark now. All Ihsan could hear was the slow roar of the river and the soft hums of the monster. Ihsan worried what would await her on the other side of the woods, when she had to see her mother again, but the woods at night were too scary, even more so than her mother.

The monster shuffled over to Ihsan and extended his arms. Ihsan fell into them, feeling, remarkably, more comfortable even than when she hugged Flacco. She started talking to the monster, both in sign and increasingly speaking aloud, talking about her mother and her therapist and the children at school that were loud and busy and touched everybody too much. At first the monster kept humming its usual note, but soon the notes varied in pace with the conversation, from sharp notes of shared irritation to warm notes of support. Soon the two were walking beneath the trees, darker than ever but somehow less imposing than before, towards the edge of the forest and to Ihsan's house.

At the edge of the forest, Ihsan turned to the monster and squeezed him harder than she had squeezed anybody ever before, for she had never met anybody before that felt the same overwhelming sensations, the same anxieties, and the same desire for hugs on their own terms, before the monster. Maybe there's more like us outside?

I can't tell you what happened with Ihsan and her mother when she walked back into the house. I can't tell you if they fought, if the police were involved, or even if Ihsan spoke up for herself, like she did for the monster's behalf against the fairy. I can't tell you if she found the other children and adults like her in the world, or other monsters like the Hug Monster. I hope she did.

All I can do is speak for a moment about Orpheus.

Orpheus, you were too scared to trust in yourself, in Eurydice, and in your shared love. In fear, you turned to face her. Was she real, or only a shade? Your eyes made her become a shade. But had you trusted in love, perhaps she'd have been real. She could have been real in your head, at least. Isn't that enough?

I don't know if the monster and the fairy were real or shades. For Ihsan they were real, and she didn't turn around to check. That's enough for me.