

sit,
stay,
love

j.j. howard

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The Closet Monster

It's really not all that hard to be invisible. I mean, first, don't talk. I haven't said anything at all in math class for the entire school year, for example. And that's why Mrs. Lawrence hasn't called on me one time.

Second, if at all possible, be plain looking. Have mousy brown hair and boring brown eyes and pale skin. Be medium height and medium size, too, if you can.

Third, hang out in a closet. But I'll get back to that.

It's not that I actually *recommend* being invisible. All I'm saying is it's pretty easy. At least for me.

I take after my dad for sure—my mom is the anti-invisible type. Her hair is very shiny and non-mousy, her eyes non-boring. Although, technically, she *is* invisible to me and Dad these days, since she left home last year.

But back to hanging out in a closet. It's my favorite place to be. My best friend, Melody, who was a genius (well, I'm sure she still *is* a genius, but since her family moved to Boston last year, I always think of her in the past tense), told me that I like closets because I'm a *chasmophile*, which is a lover of small spaces, nooks, and crannies. Mel loved big and unusual words.

My mother, who does not have any particular love of big words, just called me the Closet Monster. Mom always used the word *monster* to describe a person who was crazy about something: My dad used to be the Sports Monster, but later he became the Couch Monster. My mother was the Shopping Monster . . . mainly the Shoe Monster.

But me, I'm the Closet Monster. I'm actually more of a dog monster, because I am truly crazy about dogs. But my mother doesn't like anything that has hair or drools, so she always

pretended that my love for animals was just a passing phase, which of course it wasn't.

But anyway, on the night of the fire, as usual, I was sitting in my closet.

I was making one of my lists, this one about why I preferred puppies to people. In my room, I had lots more lists, the most recent one being a list of reasons that I deserved to have a dog. I planned to present that list to the Couch Monster soon.

I'd been asking for a dog since about birth. And I have to say, I deserve one more than most people do. I volunteer almost every day after school at Orphan Paws, which is a dog shelter in my town. And if anybody has proved to be responsible enough to take care of a pet, it's totally me.

As I made the new list, I started thinking about how much more invisible I'd gotten since Mel had moved away. Once in a while it was sort of nice to be able to blend into the background. But most of the time it was just kind of lonely.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't smell the smoke at all. And with the closet door closed and my headphones on, I didn't even hear the sirens.

My father forgot about me being a closet monster, so the very last place that the firefighters looked was the place where I actually was. I guess they had to go through the whole house twice. It was getting pretty smoky by the time a fireman yanked open the door, started yelling at me, threw me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and hauled me down the stairs and out the front door.

I sat coughing on the front lawn, with most of our neighbors staring at me. My invisibility shield was definitely *off* at that moment.

“Where’s my dad?” I asked the fireman who’d deposited me on the grass.

The man just glared at me and turned around and headed back toward our house. A few seconds later, a different fireman came out with his arm around my dad, supporting him. Dad’s face was really red, and he was coughing even harder than I was.

I ran all the way up to him before realizing that I couldn’t remember the last time we’d hugged. My dad just wasn’t a

hugging sort of guy. But right then he picked me up and squeezed me really tight.

And then a few seconds later he put me back down and started yelling at me.

“You almost gave me a heart attack! Where on earth were you hiding, Cecilia? Why didn’t you come down when you heard the *sirens*?”

I stood there in shock. Between the stress of being hauled out of my nice, quiet hiding spot and thrown down onto the damp grass—and now being yelled at—I had to blink hard to keep from crying.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting my hands up as a sort of surrender. All I really wanted at that moment was for him not to be mad at me.

Dad’s face softened. “I’m sorry, Cecilia. You just scared me to death. When I couldn’t find you . . .” His voice trailed off, and then he enfolded me in another hug.

We stood watching the firefighters shoot great streams of water into our house for a while until one of them came over to

talk to Dad. They walked a little away from me—far enough so that I couldn't hear what they were saying. When Dad finally walked back, he told me we were going to have to go to my aunt Pamela's house at least for the night.

Staying at Aunt Pamela's?

I'm not trying to be overdramatic here or anything, but it might have been better to just leave me in the closet.