

BALLOON BUTT'S OWN CREATURE FEATURE

By: Sarah Wilson Basore

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"It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" The TV newsman's voice carries through the house like the voice of doom. He says the same thing every night and I hate it. It wakes my folks from their stupor long enough to remember I exist.

"Bed, Angie."

Hear my mom? How her voice sounds thick and slurred, like she's got a mouth full of cat's eye marbles? It's compliments of her best friend, good old Jack Daniels. I hate him more than the ten o'clock news guy.

Before anyone notices I'm still wearing my jeans and T-shirt, I'd better crawl under the covers. Not that anyone's coming upstairs to tuck me in. That stopped years ago. The clothes are so I'll be ready to leave when Tony Cooper arrives.

The kids at school used to call Tony Cooper "Balloon Butt." It made him furious. They don't dare call him that anymore. Now Tony fights back with fangs and claws and bloody revenge. He's been getting his revenge for a month now.

All because, one day during lunchtime, Ryan Muldoon suggested we ride our bikes down to Ripper Park after dark fall. We were to wait until after the news – when the moon was nice and full – and sneak out of our houses. I'd just finished "The Telltale Heart" for the umpteenth time, and let me tell you Poe's book looked pretty ragged. Johnny Carson's theme song drifted up the stairs. It was time.

Taking a deep breath, I climbed out my window, duck walked up over the roof and, avoiding the thorns, scrambled down the rose trellis attached to the West side of the porch – which is the side away from the living room. I smiled as I jumped the last two feet to the ground. Made it! I grabbed my hot pink stingray bike from the shed. (Ugh, pink... might as well have ruffles and glitter on the handlebars. Can you believe it?) My butt made contact with its only saving grace, the psychedelic banana seat, and I was off like a rocket down Rockwell Street.

I was free.

The guys were waiting in a pool of light beneath a street lamp at Rockwell and Thirty-sixth. They were a motley crew: three dorks standing with one popular guy who'd suddenly deigned to give us the time of day. Just why remained a mystery.

Looking like a cherry-topped hot fudge sundae, the cop car turned the corner and headed right for us. We high-tailed it for a clump of trees, out of his headlight's glare. Lucky for us, he didn't see us, being we were out after ten o'clock curfew and all.

We moved back into the light and gathered around Ryan, who stared us down like he was a sergeant and we were nothing but a bunch of low-life privates. "You know what to do," he said.

Frankie Hibbons kept wiping the long blond hair back from his eyes. He had such pretty hair. He looked as antsy as I felt. Going into Ripper Park with all that dark wasn't my idea of having fun. The previous night's Count Gregore's Creature Feature still spooked me. "They Kill by Night:" not the best title to remember at a time like this.

Frankie looked like he'd swallowed a June bug. "Hey, man, I'm not sure I like this. Isn't what we're

about to do sacrilegious or something?” That was Frankie, full of Four-dollar words. A whiz at math, he could’ve made straight A’s all around, but he just didn’t want to. Frankie was keen on disappointing the Man.

Ryan pounced on Frankie like stink on a skunk, grabbing the fringe on his buckskin vest in two angry fists. “Look you weirdo hippie, if you can’t take it, leave! I’m not sure I want you here anyway. I need guys I can trust, not snot-nosed cowards who’ll run the minute things get good.”

The fact that he wanted any of us there surprised me. Not three days before he’d treated us like we were less than nothing. He belonged to the popular clique. We were dorks, outcasts, lower than low. Then, yesterday at lunch, out of the blue, he came up to us, looked around to see if anyone was watching, and invited us to meet him at the park. Said he had something to show us. A surprise. We didn’t trust him, but curiosity got the best of us. Besides, we figured there was safety in numbers.

Truth was, I liked Ryan, maybe more than I should have, but I sure didn’t like him treating Frankie so mean. He hadn’t let go of his vest. And Frankie was moving the toe of his earth shoe back and forth in the sidewalk dirt, a sheepish look on his skinny face. He told Ryan to cut him some slack. He was just worried, that’s all.

“I don’t need worried. You’d better buck up or you can leave right now. That goes for you all.” Ryan frowned at the rest of us. “Any quitters?”

I glanced at the others. Tony Cooper just sat there with his moon face munching a marshmallow pie, one of the banana ones. He seemed... dignified in his own kind of way. Still, he knew better than to cross Ryan. You don’t cross one of the lead popular kids, unless you want your bullying quotient to quadruple. Jonathan Crisp, the mayor’s son, took a deep breath and pushed his horn-rims back up on his bird beak nose. He didn’t have wire rims like the cool kids wore. You’d think his dad would have sprung for cool specs, wanting to keep up appearances and such. My dad said Jonny’s father was one of those white-hearted liberals who spouted all kinds of crap about civil rights and against the war in Vietnam. Dad said the man would be the death of our country. Dad said that about a lot of people.

No way was I leaving. Being the only girl, I had a reputation to protect. Besides, if something scary happened, maybe Ryan would protect me. Not very women’s lib, I know, but there you are.

“I’m not afraid.” I lifted my chin, proud my voice hadn’t wobbled. My insides felt like a Jell-O commercial. I pictured Bill Cosby taking a huge spoonful of orange wiggly stuff, then licking his lips.

Ryan smiled at me. “See, guys, if a girl isn’t scared, nobody should be.”

Wounded by the girl remark, I stuck my tongue out at him.

Ryan reached inside a basket he’d tied to the sissy bar of his bike. Black stingray with red trim – now that was my kind of bike. He held up a burlap sack for all to see. It squirmed and jiggled like something inside was trying to escape.

I wondered what on earth he’d put in the sack. All Ryan had said was that we were going to spend the midnight hour in Ripper Park. The WITCHING hour. I couldn’t remember what show it came from, but those long, drawn out musical notes that play when something weird happens on screen suddenly swept through my brain. Ooooooooooh-oooooooooh-oooh.

Everyone knows Ripper Park is haunted. Five years before, someone found the mangled body of Tommy Taylor at the base of the fountain. I pictured the pretty stone angel looking down on the bloody remnants of a five-year-old kid. Of course the adults tried to keep it from us, but news like that spreads faster than the Black Death. The papers blamed the murder on some nutcase who’d escaped from Norman’s crazy house, but we knew what really happened.

We knew there’d been a monster.

And here we were, inside Ripper Park after dark. Just asking for trouble.

The night turned cold. A chill breeze ruffled the leaves on the trees. I shivered. It had nothing to do with the temperature.

The others hid their bikes in the bushes and moved toward the park entrance. “Come on,

Angie,” Tony called over his shoulder. “We ain’t got all night.”

I translated his expression to: “I’d rather get back home to the safety of a coke and some chocolate chip cookies. At least they don’t bite back.” I was tempted to join him, but it was too late. He kept walking.

“Coming!” I climbed off my girly bike and rested it carefully on its kickstand. Dad would have my hide if I scratched it, and I didn’t want to give him another excuse. “Spare the rod and spoil the child” was his favorite verse in the Bible. I ran up the sidewalk and joined the guys at the top of the hill. The park looked pretty, in an eerie kind of way. Trees crowded around us and the full moon shone like a ghost through their branches, the leaves forming shadows that jittered in the breeze. The night smelled like rain.

The mystery of the bag was soon revealed. Ryan reached inside and held up a skinny black shape that yowled and fought like the devil to get away. Frankie looked like he was going to puke, his face gone the same neon green as his shirt. “Ah, man, what’re you gonna do to the cat?”

“Not what you think, dork. This book I read said a black cat is a magnet for evil. Something about a cat being a familiar to black magic. It might work to draw werewolves, too.”

Ryan had put a label on something we’d never dared name. Monster was as far as we’d go. Now he’d said the word... what if it answered his call?

Jonny kept pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. They kept slipping back down. It took him a minute, but he asked the question we all wanted to ask. “What are we to do when it comes for the cat?”

In other words, we only wanted to see the monster. We didn’t want it to see us.

“Kill it. With this.” Ryan handed the cat to Tony and reached back inside the burlap sack. He reminded me of Bullwinkle the Moose saying, “Hey, Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat. Nothing up my sleeve. Presto!” Only, instead of a lion, Ryan pulled out a gun.

“You can’t kill a werewolf with a gun. Surely your book told you that.” Tony dared to look disgusted.

Ryan smirked. “You think you know so much, Balloon Butt Cooper. Thing is, you don’t know squat. You forgot about silver bullets.”

I couldn’t stop myself. “Silver bullets! Are you kidding? Where’d you get the bullets, your Lone Ranger holster set? Did it come with a mask?” I looked at the others. “Hey, Sheriff, who was that masked man?”

Jonny looked surprised. Try as he might, Tony couldn’t stop the whoops of laughter exploding from behind his hand. Frankie had the good sense to hide his smile behind his hair.

Ryan’s face went red, as red as the cherry on top of that cop car. His eyes bugged like they might explode right out of his head. “Who asked you, anyway? I thought you were different. I should’ve known better than to bring a stupid old girl.”

Ryan didn’t know so much. He was dumb, ordinary, just like all the other guys in my sixth grade class. “The only stupid thing I’ve done lately is to follow some dork to the park in the middle of the night. That’s something I intend to fix right this minute. Who’s coming with me?”

Jonny smiled. Even with horn-rims, he was kind of cute when he smiled. “Sure, I’ll come. We can still catch the midnight movie at Will Rogers Theater. I hear ‘The Night Monster from Hell’ is showing and it’s supposed to be really good.” Jonny looked at Frankie and Tony. “Anyone up for a movie?”

“Do you really want to see a night monster from hell?” Ryan asked.

Tony ignored him. His face lit up with a great big smile of relief. Or was it anticipation for a huge tub of buttered popcorn and a giant pickle? I smiled back in agreement. “Count me in,” he said.

“Good idea, man. I could use the fresh air.” Frankie pinched his nose between his thumb and forefinger, making his voice sound all nasally. “Something stinks around here.”

I thought Ryan was having a fit, you know, like epel . . . eply . . . a seizure. He went even redder and began to sweat something awful. The cat went nuts. Tony dropped it and it sped away, puffed fur spiked and sticky from his moonpie hands. Good, gentle Frankie moved closer, bending down to help the creep who'd treated him so meanly. Jonny couldn't move; he just stood there staring through glasses fogged by his rapid breathing.

Fear twisted a knife in my stomach. What if Ryan died? I tried to make my feet move. We had to get help. Even if we did catch hell for it.

But no one moved. I watched spit spill from Ryan's mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head until all I could see was white. We just stood there, staring. I remember thinking how gross Ryan looked. No more pretty, popular guy. He smelled bad, too – sort of like a wet dog.

Frankie reached out to touch Ryan, almost made contact, but something made him pull back. Ryan rolled away from him, under a bush, and we couldn't see him anymore. I was glad. The sounds were bad enough. The sounds and what crawled out from under that bush.

Hollywood make-up men would have killed to see this werewolf. He made movie monsters look like puppies. His clothes hung in shreds, so we could see the way that becoming a monster deformed Ryan's body. His legs now bent backwards like a dog's hind legs. His back curved and he had a lump where his shoulders met. His arms had grown longer, as if to give him better reach. His fingers were longer too, and tipped with horrible claws. And his face. Ryan wasn't cute anymore. His eyes glowed, reflecting the moonlight in a sick shade of yellow. He grew a snout. His mouth stretched to hold teeth that looked like my mom's Ginsu knives, which would cut through anything, even a tin can. The creature that was once Ryan rose to its full height before us, all hair and teeth and mean.

It got Frankie first. I stood there and watched that monster rip his head right off. It was like tearing the head off your sister's Barbie, only so much worse. Blood went everywhere, darkening Frankie's pretty blond hair. Frankie's body wouldn't die. It kept writhing and kicking there in the dirt... like he was having his own kind of fit.

The werewolf threw the head into the trees, where it stuck in the fork of a limb. "Two points," it snarled.

Jonny kept saying, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," over and over. I sure hoped Jesus was listening to Jonny, because I didn't know how to pray. The werewolf turned toward me, blood glistening like rubies on its fangs.

It began to laugh: a horrible sound like boulders grinding together. "Now for the girl." Chills skittered up my backbone. I looked around for a rock, anything to throw. Found nothing but gravel. Better than nothing... I grabbed a handful.

"Hey, dork-face!" Tony "Balloon Butt" Cooper picked up the biggest stick he could find as the monster turned his way. He hefted it up by his shoulder like he was getting ready to hit a Hank Aaron homer. "There's no way I'm gonna let a snot-eating monster butcher my girlfriend," he said to me. "Run!"

Funny, we were friends, but I never knew he *liked* me. The monster lunged. I flung the gravel and ran. Nothing else I could do.

Jonny reached the park entrance two steps ahead of me. I was never so glad to see my ugly old bike. The minute my butt hit the seat I was moving, with Jonny right beside me. We raced through pools of yellow-green light from the street lamps. And we heard them. Howls pierced the darkness. Tony's screams cut through my ears like my dissecting knife sliced my Biology class frog. I got chills and I think I sobbed, but it didn't keep me from pedaling hell-bent for the nearest cop station.

We made it. This time I beat Jonny.

Of course nobody believed us. The adults stared at us like we were the monsters and said there's no such things as werewolves. The cops searched Ripper Park. They found the gun, but no Lone Ranger bullets. They found Ryan's body beaten to a bloody pulp, and next to it a tree branch shaped

like a Louisville Slugger. Not much was found of Frankie, just a few chewed fingers and an ear. Nothing was found of Tony at all. The adults whispered that another lunatic must have escaped from Norman and carried Tony away.

Jonny and I knew better.

My parents came to the cop station to pick me up. After lots of dramatic, whisky smelling hugs, they took me home. I got the beating of my life. They grounded me for a week, but other than that, nothing changed at our house. Things around town changed all to hell. Kids turned up missing and curfew was lowered to eight o'clock. I wasn't worried, though. The missing kids were bullies one and all.

Guess my story's almost done. Jonny called me earlier tonight. Said he'd talked to Tony and Tony told him he wanted to see me. So I'm all dressed and ready to go.

Shhh...did you hear a noise? Look, there's Tony waiting under my window. He looks different, leaner now and meaner. Bet nobody'll dare call him "Balloon Butt" anymore. And look, he brought me a present. Ryan's bike — I always did like that bike.

Well, I'd better climb on down. Don't squeal on me, okay? You know there's nothing for me here. Besides, Tony might need help getting his revenge. Werewolf or not, he is my boyfriend.

He saved my life. I owe him big time.

THE END

Sarah Wilson Basore, a.k.a. Sara Saint John writes stories of good versus evil, and the healing power of love.

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