

When I was about seven years old, I created an imaginary friend on a lonely afternoon in the summer. My parents were out and I was all alone in the house, except for my older brother Chris who was supposed to be “babysitting” me. But he was in his room playing video games with a friend and paid no attention to me. It was hot and rainy and dismal. I sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor, listening to the steady drops of rain pounding against the windows. Much like the rain, there was a steady stream of water coming from my eyes. I’m not sure if I was crying because it was raining, because Chris wouldn’t let me play with him, or because I wanted my parents to get home, but whatever the reason, I was crying. I was terribly sad, feeling lonely and unwanted, watching the rain fall through blurry, teary eyes, and wondering if I would ever find a true friend, someone who would keep me company on awful summer afternoons like this one.

I ran down the hall and stopped at Chris’s door. Wailing, I begged him to unlock it and let me in...to let me play the games too.

He shouted something back at me, barely audible over the sound of the loud, gory video game, but I imagine it was along the lines of “go away.”

In my despair, I returned to the kitchen and continued watching the rain, my mind in a million places at once. This wasn’t the first time I sat all alone, feeling unhappy and afraid. No, actually, this happened quite often throughout my troubled childhood. Friends were never around, it seemed, not when I wanted them anyway. My parents were often gone; running errands or going to work or attending parties. My brother paid no attention to me. Never. I was constantly feeling alone in the world - a tiny girl in a big, looming reality, with no one to keep me safe.

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I knew what I would do - the idea came to me like a vision. It flashed before my mind’s eye and I was filled with excitement, for I knew it would work. I knew that this was a wonderful, genius plan. I would *make* a friend. I would create the perfect companion, someone big and brave and strong, to protect me from the storm outside; but he would be kind, too, and he would love to play games with me.

My mind raced, and slowly but surely, my friend began to formulate before me. He was big - oh, yes, he was huge! He was seven feet tall. And he was furry all over, like a giant stuffed animal. Yet he was ferocious. His eyes were wild and ravenous. He had a lopsided grin, and fearsome fangs. He had paws, and one reached towards me, took my hand gently.

I smiled at him, and he smiled back. Of course he did - he was my friend. He adored me. I was his maker. I said hello and I introduced myself, told him my name was Kimberly and that I was so happy I had a friend as massive and incredible as he. My friend did not reply, and I realized my silly mistake: I had not named my friend!

“Beast.” I told him, my voice full of pride. “Your name is Beast. You are Beast, my very best friend in the world, and I am Kimberly your master.”

And Beast’s smile grew wider and we began to laugh because we knew we would be best friends forever. And we knew that as long as Beast was by my side, I would never have to feel alone again.

Everything was perfect. Until the door down the hall flew open, and Chris and his friend came walking out. They were going into the kitchen - where Beast now stood - probably to get a snack. But they stopped dead in their tracks when they saw him and they screamed. They were scared. Oddly enough, I was too. For although I had created Beast, had made him frightening on purpose, I had never actually pictured Chris like this, his face contorted

in horror, his voice hoarse as he swore aloud. I hadn't imagined how disturbing it would be, to see my big brother like this. I felt guilty for a moment, but then I remembered that Beast was my friend, and I stood by him, and I told Chris the truth.

"I created Beast. He's my friend."

Chris shook his head. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open in a state of shock. His friend stayed completely silent, completely motionless, just gaping up at Beast with a shell-shocked expression. They were quite a sight - the two of them - and, despite everything, I found myself laughing. It started as a little giggle, then rose into a high-pitched cackle. Beast joined in. The two of us stood there, laughing at the top of our lungs, whilst the two boys looked onward, manic.

Well, the fun did not last for long. I heard my parents car pulling in the driveway, and I knew I had to hide Beast from them. They would call the police or animal control and get Beast taken away from me. So I grabbed his paws and I dragged him upstairs, to my bedroom. I showed him my closet - which was wide and spacious and empty except for a few stuffed animals and a beanie bag - and told him he could sleep there. He curled up and did just that. I ran back to the kitchen, just in time to see my mom testing Chris for a temperature.

He waved his hands wildly and sputtered, trying to explain what he had seen. Of course, he sound insane. My mother exchanged a look with my father, and suddenly, they both became angry.

My father grabbed the two boys by the collars of their shirts and hauled them out the door. I heard them yelling, but somehow he got them in the car and sped off - I'm still not sure where they went. My mom sat with me, stroking my hair and muttering about the effect of drugs and alcohol on teenagers. I smiled to myself, feeling clever and naughty. But deep inside, the guilt remained.

I kept Beast a secret for two afterwards. I would lock us up in my bedroom and we'd play board games and card games and watch movies on my little TV. I'd only leave the room for meals, which I'd gobble up quickly, before running back up to my room with the leftovers. Then Beast would eat, and then we'd play more games and watch more movies. Sometimes we'd sneak out when my family was distracted. I showed him my brother's old tree house, but Beast was too big and heavy to fit inside. Mostly we just stayed in my room. We always had fun together, Beast and I.

But then the fall came, and it was time to return to school. I dreaded it, glaring at my calendar every morning when I woke up. My eighth birthday came and went, and next thing I knew I was shopping for new school supplies and trying on my third grade uniform. It was difficult explaining school to Beast. He didn't understand why I would have to leave everyday once August came. It made him sad. After all, I was his only friend and he needed me. Beast was going to miss me a lot, but I had no choice.

The first day of school was the hardest. I had to ride the bus all alone. Nothing felt the same without Beast by my side. I found it hard to talk to the other kids. They were all so hard to get along with. Sometimes they would say mean things to me or push me or copy me when I was writing schoolwork. That made me mad. Beast never did things like that. Beast was at home, waiting for me.

It was only my fifth day of school when an especially annoying boy named Danny pushed me off the swing during recess. I hit the ground hard and my mouth filled with sand. My eyes stung. Everything hurt. Tears streamed down my eyes, and my shoulder shook as I sat up and cried with all my might. Some kids scolded Danny for being mean. But most of the kids laughed. And pointed. And made fun. One kid even pushed me down again. I sat alone on the bus ride home...I sat alone and cried.

I ran straight to my room when I got home. I slammed the door behind me, and I ran into Beast's arms. I cried and cried and cried. I told Beast all about what had happened on the playground. It made Beast mad to hear about how those awful kids had treated me. We decided that tomorrow morning, Beast would meet me at recess, and that would teach them all a lesson.

Beast didn't know how to get to my school, of course, but I was his master, so I had the ability to make him appear anywhere, anytime. And I made him appear that next morning, just as Danny and all the other kids crowded around me and started calling me names.

Instantly, Beast appeared. Instantly, the children all screamed and ran away.

Beast roared and chased Danny all around the playground. He didn't hurt him, of course, but he made Danny plenty scared, and that was good enough. That night, Beast and I sat together and laughed and laughed. And my guilt was gone. Completely gone.

Things continued on in that same way for years. I was a happy kid, for the first time ever. I didn't have to try so hard with everyone at school. If they didn't like me, so what? I knew that once I returned home I could laugh the night away with my best friend in the world. Beast. He kept me going through thick and thin. We were the perfect pair, the two of us. Whatever my interest was that year, Beast was interested too. We grew closer and closer overtime.

Then the high school years came. My parents started worrying about me, the way I spent all my spare time locked up in my room. I convinced them that I was on the phone with a friend, which explained the voices they'd hear coming from my room. I had plenty of excuses - homework was a good one. My parents calmed down slightly, but with Chris now in a psychiatric ward for his constant nightmares and irrational fears, I guess it made sense that they were concerned about me.

Sometimes the guilt would return. Horrible memories from that day when Chris started running around the house, breaking things and shouting words about a "creature in the kitchen" would haunt me in my dreams. The way my parents tried to calm him down, but nothing would do. The way he pointed at me accusingly, begging me to admit that I had seen it too, that I too knew about "Beast." I stood there, shaking my head, trying hard to look dumb and confused. It worked, apparently, because my parents never bothered to ask me about what might have my brother so upset. Instead, they had him admitted. The night they dragged my brother off, I stood in the kitchen with Beast, just the way we had before. Beast seemed sad. I gave him a hug. I reminded him that it wasn't his fault. I was the one created Beast.

Friends from high school often invited me to parties, to the movies, out for coffee. Prom passed by, and I didn't care at all. I always declined. I would spend the nights with Beast, telling him about my day, laughing at his jokes, having him help me with my homework. I was happy just to be with Beast. Nothing else seemed to matter. He was my best friend, and as long as I had him, I didn't need anyone or anything else. I never felt lonely anymore.

But careful as I was to keep Beast hidden, to keep him safe, I made the mistake of trusting him one night. I finally accepted one of my friends' invitations, and I drove off in my car, five miles south, for a late-night party.

The party was great, and I ended up having a fun time, even without Beast. But I hadn't been stern enough with him - he showed up at the party, thinking that would be alright. He didn't understand. Or maybe he did, and he was just in denial. Everyone freaked out, and ran away. My friends grabbed me and pulled me into a car. We sped off, while I screamed at them to turn around. I tried to convince them that Beast was my friend, that he wouldn't hurt them. They didn't even hear me. They were screaming too loudly.

Finally, I convinced them to drop me off at my house. I went to my room casually, telling my parents that the party was fine, it had just broken off early. I found Beast curled up in my closet, as usual. But I was struck when I saw him - he was crying. It was a moment of horrible recognition. He looked so much like I did, back when I was seven, sitting on the kitchen floor...all alone. Scared. Sad. Lonely.

I sat down next to him and hugged him. My attempts at comforting him did no good. After all these years of happiness and contentedness, both of us found ourselves completely confused. Our friendship had always been perfect. What happened? What changed between us? Beast was sad...he didn't love me anymore. He felt betrayed. Why? What had I done? And as for me...well, I found that I didn't love Beast anymore either. He had made a mistake. A stupid mistake, one which I would have to try and neatly cover up, lest he be discovered.

This was all Beast's fault. Things were so good. Why did he have to go and mess everything up?

The next day, my parents dragged me into the car and we sped off. I bawled my eyes out the entire ride, trying to explain it all. It was no use. They thought I was crazed, just like my brother. I guess I was.

Now I have grown much older. I am still here, in the psychiatric ward. Everyday people come and talk to me. Everyday I answer their questions, and do as they tell me. Sometimes I am able to see my brother. He cries when he sees me, and we both cry when we talk about Beast. We don't know where Beast is now. No one knows.

People tell me all the time that Beast was never real. That he was an imaginary friend. A figment of my imagination. An idea that got out of hand and grew into something sinister. They try to explain to me that my loneliness as a child prompted me to create Beast, but that his existence has always been limited only to my mind. Beast isn't real. He never was. I was only imagining, and so was my brother, and the handful of teenagers at that party who saw him as well.

Beast isn't real. They tell me that all the time.

But I know better. For I am his master, and I can make him appear anywhere, anytime. And when they aren't watching me, and I do just that. I make Beast appear. He keeps me company. Things aren't the same, anymore. Beast isn't the same, and neither am I. Our friendship is strained. But at least we don't have to be alone.