Fred took up residence at 4633 Villa Green Drive, as far as I know, on one of the first pleasant, cool days of autumn that comes to Tennessee like the first cool sip of water after a long journey through a desert. Sitting on the floor watching television while my parents sat in the next room doing the monthly bills, I was blithely unaware of the terror that loomed just beyond the big bay windows of our den. We had framed an arbor over the wooden deck on which several varieties of grapes grew. At the time it did not seem like the likely habitat for a horror, but I was about to learn that monsters live anywhere they please. Fear owned me when I looked out and saw the huge, nightmarish creature hanging from his bald, pink tail, fangs dripping with the blood of its last victim. After an eternity of seconds, I gathered enough courage to pull myself away and sprint into the kitchen.

"Mama, mama!" I screamed. "There's a big monster and he's hangin' off the porch and he's got a big pink tail and he wants to eat me!"

My parents told me not to bother them with any more stories because they were very busy with the bills. I managed only a few tentative steps back into the den before I saw it again, swinging back and forth, laughing its silent possum laughter. I ran back into the kitchen and started jabbering again. This time my mother wearily arose and told me: "If I don't find a really big scary monster hanging from its tail outside, you're in serious trouble." Apparently, my monster suitably impressed her because, for the first time to my knowledge, she broke the Second Commandment and introduced me to one of the few vulgarities in her vocabulary.

"Oh my God, what the hell is that thing!"
This initial event led to many other similar happenings in the coming years. The marked episode in my memory occurred when one of Nashville's leading socialites—a beautiful and elegant woman whose name I will not mention—came running inside with animal fear in her eyes. "Some thing out there," she said after a couple of stiff drinks, "has a big snout with little brown fangs in it, and its so . . .icky!"

This particular woman never came to our house again. Soon after this incident, my father decided to take action. My mother stopped him, however, before he could, as he put it, "Blow that damn thing away." Then his anger turned festive, and he decided to name the beast Fred after one of my mother's old boyfriends.

Over the next couple of years, Fred became a larger-than-life figure, physically as well as metaphorically, to my little brother and me. He became the symbol of all things unknown and scary to us. He lived in every dark corner of our worst nightmares. He also became a very effective, if somewhat sadistic, discipline tool for my parents. We believed that Fred saw everything, and he would get us if we did anything bad. Fred knew if we had not gone to bed on time or if we had dumped our peas out under the dinner table. But Fred's brief reign as the dark king of our deck came abruptly to an end when the arbor became so rotten that it partially collapsed. We were forced to knock it down and render Fred and his family homeless.

Fred's legacy thrived long after he departed Villa Green Drive. He was still the lord and master of the dark places in the world. He still haunted the young hours of the morning when I woke up to use the bathroom. The evil specter that was Fred possessed me until I attended a summer camp at the Cumberland Museum. One day we were
allowed to go into the dank, concrete block and linoleum room that served as the habitat for the various animals that the museum used for exhibits. Suddenly it was there, the huge, snarling beast from hell. No more than ten inches and a very puny looking cage separated me from the only marsupial native to North America. A counselor, seeing my fear, took the bold step of unlocking the cage, picking up the gruesome beast, and wrapping the long, pink tail around my forearm.

"She's very tame," said the counselor.

I knew better though. I could do nothing but wait for the possum to devour me alive, eating my eyeballs first because I knew that was a possum’s favorite food. But the dumb thing just hung there. After I got over my fear, I realized that that possums were just stupid animals. I felt an immeasureable animosity toward the animal; I wanted to tear it apart with my bare hands. This had been, after all, my predator for three years. But instead, I just put the thing back in its home, carefully wrapping its tail around the metal pipe at the top of the cage. I sensed even then that life would never be the same; my monster had turned out to be nothing more than an oversized rat which was as scared of me as I was of it. I was free of Fred.

I still think about Fred sometimes. It helps me to remember that you should not fear things you do not understand. When something seems so big and scary it is useful to remember that the Fred, who dominated three years of my young childhood as the supreme monster, turned out to be nothing more than a scared little animal. Fred taught me to put everything into perspective. This experience led me to discover that although some things look big, scary, and incomprehensible, the truth about most things is remarkably simple.
Fred was my last imaginary monster. He signaled the end of my childhood filled with all the normal nightmares and monsters in the closet. This is not to say that nothing unknown ever scared me again; we fear all our lives of what we do not fully understand, and some of us will admit it before others. Many times before I have heard people say that if you are not a little scared of some things, you are either really crazy or really stupid. Fred, and all the incidents surrounding him, led me to a deeper understanding of how to accept and live with the unknown things out there in the world.

Occasionally I wonder what happened to Fred and his family. Maybe they found happiness on someone else's deck. Maybe they ended up as a big pile of congealed goo in the middle of the road. Either way, part of Fred will always be with me, rocking gently back in the dark corners of the world and laughing his silent possum laughter.