

Monsters as Metaphor: Understanding our worst fears

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Lauren DeLorenzo

Thesis Advisor

Professor Kathryn S. Gardiner

**Ball State University
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Abstract

Monsters have haunted humankind since the beginning of our history, reflecting the fears and values of the society which they originate. From cave paintings to the latest horror blockbuster, monsters exist most clearly in stories. Storytelling is a tool to process our fears, and monsters give us a way to represent and examine these fears. This thesis will examine five fears and how they have manifested in monster tales throughout history, providing context for each. These fears are as follows: fear of nature, fear of the sacred (religion), fear of science, fear of others and fear of ourselves. An accompanying screenplay will follow each section to demonstrate how monsters draw upon these fears and how stories allow audiences to work through them.

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Dr. Mullins and classmates from ENG 410 (Advanced Screenwriting) for their feedback on one of the included screenplays.

Table of Contents

Process Analysis Statement	1
Introduction	3
<i>Script: 'Welcome...'</i>	
Fear of Nature	6
<i>Script: 'Slick'</i>	
Fear of the Sacred	10
<i>Script: 'Enlightenment'</i>	
Fear of Science	14
<i>Script: 'Human Matter'</i>	
Fear of Others	18
<i>Script: 'The Rotters'</i>	
Fear of Ourselves	22
<i>Script: 'Radio Silence'</i>	
Works Cited.....	25

Process Analysis Statement

The study of monsters has ties to research in biology, sociology, psychology, religion and philosophy, and can be viewed through the lens of race, gender, class, sexuality and culture. After preliminary research, it was clear that monsters were used for a variety of functions throughout history. The research presented itself as a multi-faceted beast which declined to fit into neat categories for analysis.

As such, I decided that the best way to demonstrate my thesis was to focus on five fears. I would provide a brief historical context for the evolution of each fear and the monsters which emerged from them. I would then put this research into practice with a short screenplay which would imagine a new way for this fear to manifest.

Because the study of monsters intersects with other academic areas, I often found myself being drawn down paths which were not directly related to my topic. For example, one of the most surprising aspects of this thesis was discovering how deeply monsters were rooted in politics. Before I knew it, I was researching how slasher movies of the 70's and 80's were, in part, a reaction to the counterculture of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' of the 60's.

I found myself reaching into the current horror trends of film, television and novels for inspiration for the creative aspect of this thesis. I had been fascinated by horror, but had only dipped my toes into the genre. I realized that the stories which left the greatest impact on me were the ones which forged the strongest sense of connection between the audience and the main character. I attempted to replicate this feeling in all of the short screenplays in this thesis.

I immersed myself in each of these fears, identifying the underlying reasons for them and creating characters who would either embrace or reject the fear. I resolved to tell stories from different cultures and time periods in order to illustrate the pervasiveness of monster narratives

throughout history and to take advantage of settings where these fears would be most apparent. It was also a personal creative challenge to delve into new time periods and settings which I had never previously explored. ‘Slick’ takes place in modern day California, a time period and geographical region which must face fears of nature (in the form of fires and earthquakes) and the threat of climate change-fuelled disasters on a regular basis. ‘Enlightened’ takes place in the late 1800s in India, where faith was an integral part of familial life. ‘Human Matter’ is a story set in the near future, amid a backdrop of rapid technological change. The story ‘The Rotters’ demonstrates a fear of the Other, taking place in the United States in the 1920s — a time of huge social and political change. The final story, ‘Radio Silence,’ occurs in modern day at a university setting, reflecting a fear of ourselves.

Ultimately, this thesis is an exercise in empathy. The better we understand the ‘monstrous’ — the more we sympathize with their flaws and understand their roots — the harder it is to condemn them. If we can understand and even empathize with monsters, we can better understand ourselves.

Monsters as Metaphor: Understanding our worst fears

There's danger in the woods.

In the late 19th century, the Algonquian group of First Nations people in Canada and the northern United States had a story which echoes through the decades. It tells of a hunter who was driven from his camp to the forest to find food during a particularly harsh winter. When the hunter does not return, the camp goes to look for him — only to find the half-eaten bodies of the hunter's family. The camp knows what happened. The hunter's intense starvation led him to become a Wendigo, a cold, cannibalistic monster with an insatiable hunger and a heart made of ice.

The Wendigo myth has been used to explain strange deaths and disappearances (a Native man called Swift Runner claimed the beast murdered his family), to solidify ethical values against cannibalism, and to justify fears of a cold, dark winter.

Monsters tell us who we are, what we believe, and what we abhor. It's clear that monsters have an important role to play in any cultural narrative. In this thesis, I examine what monster stories can tell us about societal fears, exploring where these narratives came from and how they are represented in contemporary media. Therefore this thesis proposes:

Storytelling is a tool for processing fear with monsters acting as complex metaphors for what a society abhors in its cultural and historical context.

We use monsters to identify our fears, to examine them, to justify them. This thesis is broken into five sections, analysing five different fears. These are fear of nature, fear of the sacred, fear of science,

fear of others, and fear of ourselves. In addition to providing evidence for monsters acting as metaphors in each category of fear, I will also use examples of this process with an anthology of short screenplays.

Typically, a thesis like this would define the term ‘monster.’ But the concept is a difficult beast to cage, always scratching and clawing its way out. This thesis subscribes to Judith Halberstam’s argument that monsters are “meaning-making machines,” acting as a framework to describe whatever we find abhorrent within our cultural and historical context. Monsters have structured ideas about criminal justice; demonized African Americans during slavery; provided commentary on scientific progress and religious doctrines; discriminated against people with physical abnormalities; criticised social, political and belief systems; and defined what it means to be human. There are as many ways to define a monster as there are to think about the world, and any attempt to define the term would be reductive. The same lake-dwelling creature from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), for example, is both a source of unknowable horror in the 1950’s version and a sympathetic love interest in the 2018 film *The Shape of Water*. Both versions of the creature give us an idea about cultural attitudes and fears through their diverging depictions. This is why focusing on just five fears will be helpful in gaining deeper insight into the fear itself rather than the innumerable depictions of specific monsters.

First, we will venture into the wilderness and explore monsters which were created from a **fear of nature**, including sea monsters, forest-dwelling tricksters, and ferocious beasts. Then, drawing upon centuries of ancient religious stories, we’ll run from demons, djinn, witches, and ghostly figures that stem from a **fear of the sacred**. If we manage to survive, we’ll have to outwit mad scientists, mutated misfits, and the technological terror which mutated from a **fear of science**. Xenophobia and group-think will haunt us through an exploration of zombies and other monsters which arise from a **fear of others**. Finally, we will look inwards at the monsters which never leave us, examining cultural obsessions with serial killers and moral conflicts which stem from a **fear of ourselves**.

These five fears were chosen as they were the one which were found most consistently throughout the research. The most well-known monsters can fit into at least one of these categories, sometimes more. One of the most primal fears, the fear of death, was not included as a category. This is because all monsters ultimately represent this fear. To give death a category of its own would be to undermine its influence in every other fear.

This thesis will not attempt to be a definitive guide to monsters. Rather, through examining these fears, this thesis will set out to prove that storytelling is one of the most valuable tools to not only process our fears, but also to reflect on what truly scares us. So pick up your pitchforks and torches — there is darkness ahead.

Welcome...

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

INT. DARK THEATER - NIGHT

A CRACK of lightning splits the air.

An old film projector with that REELING, ROLLING noise. Its light flickers and goes out.

Curtains are drawn closed on stage. A FIGURE, wearing a suit, walks onto the dark stage, face obscured, hands clasped.

FIGURE

Welcome, welcome. I assume you are here because of fear - to learn about it and the monsters it creates. But it would be unfair of me to proceed without a quick word of warning. We are about to delve into the world of monsters. The place that belongs to the demonic, the twisted and the depraved. We will look at five fears. For each fear we will examine the ghastly creatures which came crawling from our imaginations. The tales which follow will inform you. They will entertain you. And they might even give you unpleasant dreams...

Another CRACK of lightning, a spark flies from the projector, lighting up the stage -

- illuminating the bottom half of the Figure's face, and they SMILE...

FIGURE (CONT'D)

Should you choose to continue, remember: you've been warned.

FADE TO BLACK.

Fear of Nature

“My overwhelming feelings at the time were of fear and panic, but mainly helplessness and powerlessness.... there was nowhere to hide from the forces of nature.”

— Brian Hollis, survivor of the Wellington Wahine storm.

In 2010, the island country of Haiti was hit with the fifth most devastating natural disaster in history, a tsunami which left an estimated 300,000 people dead. A year later, an 8.9 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Japan resulted in 40-foot-tall waves tearing into coastal towns. Survivors who witnessed the horror later said that it felt surreal.

That it felt like the end of the world.

The public has a fascination with watching “disaster porn,” spending hours watching the destruction caused by natural disasters. Wake Forest University Professor Eric Wilson theorizes that we are drawn in to watching these events because an awareness of potential dangers could help us survive if we were to also find ourselves in those situations. Watching these events eases anxiety about potential threats by making us feel more prepared for them. He suggests that this is an evolutionary function.

However ethically questionable this form of voyeurism can be, watching through a screen allows us to be at a comfortable distance from the horror—close enough to validate our fears, but not too close as to cause lasting trauma. Monsters, in a similar way, function as tools for us to

validate and explore our anxieties. We can immerse ourselves in adrenaline-inducing scenarios, knowing that we may return to our safe, everyday life at a moment's notice.

Humanity has long been aware that the world we live in is not always safe. From ancient fears of forest-dwelling predators to the looming effects of climate change, our environment is one of the oldest and most prevalent threats to human existence.

In his book "On Monsters," which analyses the origins of monstrous creatures throughout history, Professor Stephen Asma also wonders if these fears are evolution at work (Asma 3). Those who were scared of nature were much less likely to go wandering into a murky pool of water or a dark forest, and thus avoided the very real predators which waited for them. The Sasquatch, Godzilla, King Kong, the Loch Ness monster and the shark from *Jaws* (1975) can all be seen as manifestations of our fear of the natural world and our reluctance to stray from safe, familiar environments. Even the creatures from *Alien* (1972) stem from the same fear of unknown environments.

Another example of our fear of the land can be found in Ireland and the legend of the hidden people or the Huldafólk. With deep ties to the land and the ability to turn invisible, these creatures often cause trouble for those who live nearby. Scholar Ólína Thorvarðardóttir explains that "oral tales concerning Icelandic elves and trolls no doubt served as warning fables. They prevented many children from wandering away from human habitations, taught Iceland's topographical history, and instilled fear and respect for the harsh powers of nature." But as we

might suspect, our obsession with natural monsters runs much deeper and darker than this straightforward evolutionary explanation.

One of the most terrifying aspects of nature is that human efforts can be rendered utterly insignificant in the face of such powerful, uncontrollable forces. The *largeness* of nature erases any attempt to control it. Leo Braudy, Professor of English at the University of Southern California, says that natural monsters “represent our fear and misunderstanding of the world around us, and its resistance to our attempts at domestication” (Dickey, 2019). This resistance to domestication is perhaps so terrifying because we live with the assumption that it is individual actions which are responsible for the environment we are in. It’s only when the tornado sirens start or when our phone GPS stops working in the middle of a wooded area that we are reminded of how large the world is, and how insignificant we are.

Some monster narratives offer solutions to our lack of control. While it’s difficult to comprehend the destruction of a sudden hurricane, the monster has an intention, motivation, and can sometimes be reasoned with. The Native American Wendigo myth tells of a man-eating creature who roams the forest during desolate winters, and can be seen as a manifestation of the danger of wandering through the forests. In order to ward off this monster and the (very real) fear of starvation during the winter months, First Nations groups performed specific rituals to prevent Wendigos and other spirits from entering their camp. Maybe monsters like the Wendigo offer us a way of dealing with our fears by giving us a feeling of greater control. “If only we do *x*,” we tell ourselves, “we will be safe.” But the reality is there is no ritual, no superstition, no moral code to follow that will guarantee our safety from the natural world.

And that might be the most terrifying thing of all.

Slick

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

Address
Phone
E-mail

FADE IN:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - 2030

Dark water, bubbling, VIOLENTLY.

BEEP.

A hand picks up the shaking KETTLE and pours boiling water into two mugs.

This is DALE - bald, early forties, no nonsense. Wearing pajamas. He stares at the two mugs of instant coffee he's just made. Today is going to suck.

He takes the coffee into his

LIVING ROOM

where A PRODUCTION CREW is setting up. In his own living room! Lights, cameras, people buzzing on phones, madness.

The crew all wear shirts with a blue logo that says: "Ally."

Dale steps around cords and frantic publicists just to get to his own sofa. He sits -

RANDOM P.A.
(fixing lamp)
Oh, not there, Mr. Roberts.

DALE
Oh, sorry, ha. Just used to sitting
on my own couch -

He stands. The crew moves around him like he's just more furniture to be arranged. Dale, lost. He holds up the mugs.

DALE (CONT'D)
Do you know if she takes sugar?

RANDOM P.A.
No.

DALE
"No" you don't know, or "no" she
doesn't take sug-

ALLY (O.S.)
Oh, I cut out caffeine years ago.
It's bad for the rain forests.

Dale almost drops the mugs. The air has shifted. An icon has appeared - ALLY LYONS, polished, mid fifties, absolutely unreadable. She smiles her talk-show-host-smile.

ALLY (CONT'D)

I'm Ally. So good to finally meet you, Dale. Though I wish it was for a happier occasion.

Dale fumbles, maneuvers the two mugs to shake her hand.

DALE

Well, yeah, me too.

ALLY

Thank you for welcoming us into your home for this.

DALE

Well. Your producers really pushed for it -

ALLY

These things go so much better when we're invited into your real, authentic life.

A CREW MEMBER dislodges Dale's framed painting of the forest from the wall, replacing it with an abstract black and white line painting.

DALE

Sure. Authentic.

A table is wheeled into the room. On top is a large rectangle covered in a BLACK CLOTH so we can't see what's underneath.

DALE (CONT'D)

What's that?

ALLY

More equipment.
(looking at his pajamas)
Have you seen wardrobe yet?

WARDROBE MIKE (O.S.)

I'm getting to him.

ALLY

Thanks, Mike.

DALE

So, how much do you want from me, exactly?

(MORE)

DALE (CONT'D)

I've got to pick up Miley from school later, and your rep said it wouldn't take more than an hour -

ALLY

I don't think you realize how much the public needs to hear this from you. You were there when Lily Hammond d-

DALE

Went missing.

Ally's mouth twists - but she doesn't contradict him.

ALLY

Exactly. People need hope, Dale. That's what 'Ally' is all about.

Ally is tapped on the shoulder by a MAKEUP ARTIST, leaving Dale. The object covered in BLACK CLOTH looms in the corner.

LATER

Dale's living room has TRANSFORMED. Two sleek white armchairs face each other - Dale, now smartly dressed, in one. Ally in the other.

Glass coffee table in the middle. The RANDOM P.A. puts a mug with the "Ally" logo on it. Dale picks it up -

RANDOM P.A.

Don't drink that.

He puts it down.

A light switches on, right in Dale's face. He squints, shields his face with his hand. The object in BLACK CLOTH is behind the chairs.

DALE

How do I know when we've started?

ALLY

We've started.

Dale straightens.

ALLY (CONT'D)

Why don't you take us to when you first heard about the spill.

DALE

Well, it was everywhere, wasn't it?

MONTAGE - NEWS FOOTAGE OF OIL SPILL

DALE (V.O.)

Every doctor's office, gas station
and bar in California had it on the
news.

-- Aerial footage of the black stain on the California coast.

DALE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

You remember. It was bad.

-- CLEANUP WORKERS in white hazard suits on the beach.

-- PIPELINE OFFICIAL being interviewed.

PIPELINE OFFICIAL

...it's clearly too early to be
putting the blame on anyone, but as
the head of Traxel Pipelines I can
say that we find it deeply
regrettable, what happened on the
California coast. Deeply, deeply
regrettable...

-- A BIRD with oil-soaked wings trying to lift itself out of
the water and failing.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. BOAT RAMP - DAY

A dozen or so boats lining up to go out to sea. There's no
oil on this part of the coast.

DALE (V.O.)

It was regrettable enough for the
EPA to offer three hundred bucks to
anyone with a boat and a brain to
help with the cleanup.

Dale, like the other workers, wears a white hazard suit. His
medium-sized fishing boat is halfway in the water. He is
tying it to the dock.

DALE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I happened to have the boat, an
overdue rent, and a young daughter
to take care of.

There's a larger fishing boat on the dock next to him.
There's a metal ARM sticking out of it.

The arm is connected to a wheelchair, where WILSON sits - late forties, deep laugh lines, ready for adventure.

Tying up the contraption is MEL - late fifties with short dark grey hair and strong arms.

MEL
(smiles at Wilson)
Ready?

LILY
Are you sure this is secure, Mel?
You're not going to drop my husband
into the ocean by mistake?

LILY, also late forties, rounded features and a scowl. If she can get through today without screaming it will be a miracle.

WILSON
Honey, Mel knows what she's doing,
it's her boat.

The arm lifts Wilson off the dock and into the boat. Mel jumps into the boat to help lock the wheelchair to the floor.

LILY
Okay, but, that's an ocean of oil.
It's toxic. I don't want to wake up
years from now with stage three
cancer.

WILSON
Lil, it's completely safe.

MEL
(mumbling the "Jaws" theme
song)
Da DUN da DUN da DUN.

Wilson elbows her fondly - cut it out - but smiling.

Lily huffs, stabs a finger at Mel.

LILY
Well, if anything happens, I'm
holding you responsible.

WILSON
Lily...

LILY
What? I don't trust this wreck of a
ship one bit...

Mel groans as the couple descend into an argument.

LILY (CONT'D)
 ...and you barely know how to drive
 it -

WILSON
 I've been on this boat plenty of
 times.

LILY
 Oh right, you two go on your little
 fishing trips. And somehow you keep
 forgetting to invite me.

Dale waves at the group.

DALE
 Sorry - s'cuse me! Could I get your
 help for a second?

MEL
 (an escape!)
 Oh thank god. Yes, of course.

Mel jumps out of her boat and walks over.

MEL (CONT'D)
 Need a hand?

DALE
 Yeah. You made it look easy.

The two of them attach a skimmer to the back end of the boat
 - this is the plastic barrier that catches oil on the surface
 of the water.

MEL
 You going out there alone? Because
 if you could use another set of
 hands out there...

Dale glances back at Wilson and Lily, who are bickering.

DALE
 Welcome aboard.

EXT. OCEAN - DALE'S BOAT

Dale and Mel, jetting through the water, scooping up the
 black oil.

MEL

Wish my boat ran this smooth.

DALE

Yeah, she's reliable. So how do you all know each other?

MEL

Wilson and I kept running into each other at these outdoor activity clubs. Hiking groups, kayaking, that sort of thing.

DALE

Nice.

MEL

And Lily, she's been with him for ages. Everyone always said it - they're a model couple.

EXT. OCEAN - DAY

Dozens of little boats. Skimmers are leaving tracks in the oil, but it's a big job, and it's slow work. On

MEL'S BOAT

Wilson is driving and Lily is sulking. She sits in the middle of the boat, watches the water rush past. Then JOLTS.

LILY

I think I saw something move.

WILSON

(unconcerned)

What was it.

LILY

I don't know. But it was there, definitely. A long twisty thing. Like it was camouflaged.

Wilson points at the fish finder, which every so often BLINKS and shows the shapes of what's below the boat.

WILSON

There's nothing on here. Just a few small fish.

LILY

I definitely saw something.

WILSON

It was probably a current.

(a pause)

If you didn't want to come, you didn't have to.

LILY

And let you and Mel have some bonding time?

The radio crackles.

MEL (V.O.)

Just checking in. Are you and Lily doing alright?

WILSON

Yeah. How much oil have you got?

INTERCUT WILSON/MEL

MEL

Twenty-five gallons. You?

Wilson looks to Lily, who has a "how-should-I-know" face. Wilson makes something up.

WILSON

Almost the same. Maybe twenty-six.

MEL

Maybe twenty-six? You trying to make a competition out of this?

WILSON

Mel, it's not a competition, it's an environmental disaster.

MEL

First to sixty gallons?

WILSON

Make it seventy and get ready for a soul-crushing defeat.

Wilson grins.

END INTERCUT.

LILY

Hello. You know I'm sitting right here. Your wife. Your 'one and only.' Your mac to your cheese. Your... fish to water.

WILSON
 (smile quirks up)
 Who's the fish?

LILY
 Ha ha. Go ahead, keep flirting with
 her, I'll just be here freaking
 out, in the middle of the ocean,
 seeing things in the water -

WILSON
 Lil, you know I'd never -

LILY
 That's not the point! You *like* her
 better, and that's worse. You think
 I'm useless.

WILSON
 (gently)
 You're not useless. You're...
 (changes direction)
 you're not useless.

LILY
 I'm what?

Wilson presses his lips together and stares ahead at the bay.

WILSON
 Nothing!

LILY
 Nothing. I'm nothing.

WILSON
 You want to know what's wrong?
 That's it right there. Everything I
 say ends up being a personal attack
 on you.

Wilson spins his chair to face Lily.

WILSON (CONT'D)
 You think the whole world's out to
 get you, all the time.

LILY
 No I don't -

WILSON
 You won't go hiking because you
 think there's murderers on the
 trails.

(MORE)

WILSON (CONT'D)

You won't go kayaking because of leeches, and you won't go camping because of bears -

LILY

That's what's wrong, that I'm scared of bears?

Wilson throws his hands up.

WILSON

For god's sake. As soon as there's the slightest possibility something might go wrong, you shut it out. You can never just trust that the worst might not happen. Maybe the boat won't tip over. Maybe I would never... be unfaithful.

Lily is quiet.

WILSON (CONT'D)

I don't even know why you're out here. You hate water.

A pause. Wilson turns and twists some metal valves.

At the back of the boat, the skimmer starts to whirl and round up the oil. The black gunk gets sucked into the center.

The silence drips with years of unvoiced thoughts. Suddenly:

LILY

I'll drive.

Lily grabs a lever.

LILY (CONT'D)

I'll drive. This is accelerate?

WILSON

Lil, don't be stupid.

Lily pulls the lever and the boat JETS AWAY!

Wilson YELLS as the boat whips through the water. Wilson loses grip on his water bottle, which flies into the ocean -

- sinking past the oil, into a deeper and deeper blue, past a black shape -

Meanwhile on

DALE'S BOAT

It's calm waters. Dale and Mel have a pack of cards out. They look up as Wilson and Lil jet past, yelling.

Mel pales.

MEL'S BOAT

WILSON (CONT'D)
(shouting)
Stop stop stop stop stop!

To her amazement, Lily LAUGHS. Lets out a 'whoop' of joy. Wilson's smile grows. She puts out her arms in the wind.

MEL (V.O.)
(through the radio)
You guys have to move! You're coming up to -

LILY
(yelling over the noise)
What was that?

Wilson's smile drops. He holds the radio to her ear. Eyes wide:

WILSON
Lily, Lily turn! TURN!

Wilson grabs the wheel and spins them off path - just in time to avoid colliding with a huge HOUSEBOAT.

The women, recovering. Lily slowly turns to the water behind them, oil upturned. She yells after the COUPLE, both late 50's and wearing floral vacation shirts, on the houseboat as they drift away.

LILY
SORRY!

Wilson is laughing.

LILY (CONT'D)
What?

WILSON
You. Are insane.

LILY
I might get in a bit of trouble for that.

WILSON

No worse than the damage that's
already done.

Wilson shakes his head, still smiling. The radio crackles.

MEL (V.O.)

What the hell was that?

Wilson picks up the radio.

WILSON

The gas got stuck. We're fine.

MEL (V.O.)

Are you sure you're okay to -

WILSON

No, no we've got it. We won't
scratch your boat, promise.

DALE'S BOAT

Mel puts down the radio.

MEL

That boat isn't going to make it to
the end of the day in one piece -
what are you looking at?

DALE

That rock is moving.

At the

ROCK

Sticking out of the water. Dale takes the boat as close as he
dares. The rock looks black, we realize it's MOVING -

- dozens of small slimy octopuses, covered in oil and
crawling up to the top of the rock.

DALE (CONT'D)

Shit, do you see that?

MEL

I had a friend who saw this happen
once. When octopuses are badly
injured, if they're dying, they
sometimes get confused. They
stumble onto land. But... this
shouldn't be happening to all of
them. Not all at the same time.

They both watch the octopuses for a moment. The creatures slip up the rock, flaring against the black.

DALE

Think this is happening to other places?

MEL

Maybe.

(a pause)

"Deeply regrettable."

MEL'S BOAT

Wilson and Lily are eating sandwiches in silence.

The radio crackles. Wilson picks it up, plays with the dials to get a better signal.

WILSON

I think we're picking up signals from another vessel.

Crackle. A voice, cut off. It goes in and out, but it's just sounds. Then the signal cuts out completely.

LILY

Weird.

(a pause)

I'm still mad at you.

WILSON

Ditto.

Lily cuts her a look, Wilson smiles gently back. Lily drops her sandwich, looks out to the ocean.

LILY

I hate being out here. Too many things could happen.

Out across the open water.

WILSON

And that is what makes it so exciting.

On the fish finder: A tentacle shape floats past.

The boat BUMPS. They stumble.

LILY

What was that?

A lick of a tentacle disappears under the boat just as Wilson peers over the side. She misses it.

Lily checks the fish finder. Nothing.

LILY (CONT'D)
It's not picking up anything. Maybe we hit a rock? But there's no fish or... anything.

Wilson comes to look at it. Lily, looking out to sea.

LILY (CONT'D)
Hey.

She follows her line of vision to the houseboat from earlier. Racing towards them. The waters behind them are violent, and the ripples can be felt in MEL'S BOAT.

Wilson flips the radio on and off.

WILSON
Hello? Hello?

Nothing. Calm.

WILSON (CONT'D)
What...

The couple, waving at them to get out.

And then a DEEP ECHOING RUMBLE, a SCREECH. Something in PAIN. The waters TREMBLE.

Wilson wrestles with the wheel to keep the boat from turning over.

A mound of brown moves above the surface. It slinks in an oval shape. It's HUGE.

A SUCKING SOUND, like a bath drain sucking down water.

CRACK!

The houseboat SPLITS in the center, and is dragged underwater in a blink.

Lily SCREAMS.

Wilson turns the boat away -

- in the rear mirror, a tentacle, flesh ripped and torn, hanging from the limb. Fishing nets and spears and plastic waste grown into the monster's flesh -

MEL (CONT'D)
 Wilson, Lily -
 (to Dale)
 Can you see them?

DALE
 No. No, they're gone. We have to
 leave, now.

Mel, realizing that they're gone.

DALE (CONT'D)
 (to Mel)
 Let's go, come on!

They speed away, a rumbling SCREECH from underneath them.

EXT. THE COASTLINE - DAY

The MONSTER, half out of the water. Its tentacles have
 destroyed everything around it. It is dead.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Dale takes a sip from his coffee. Ally watches him.

ALLY
 And - you never saw them after
 that.

DALE
 Well, if I did I wouldn't be so
 miserable, would I? It's alright
 for me, I - my daughter was safe, I
 was safe.

ALLY
 Yes. Thank god for that.

INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

The last of the equipment being put away.

Dale looks at the black cloth object.

ALLY
 It's a gift. For your time today.
 My sister-in-law was out on those
 boats. Elise Lyons. She didn't need
 the money. But she wanted to go. To
 help.

Ally shows him a photo of her on her phone. It's the girl on the houseboat.

Dale uncovers the black cloth tentatively.

It's a handheld RADIO.

EXT. DALE'S BOAT - DAY - FLASHBACK

Mel on the radio.

MEL

Wilson, Lily, can you hear me?

Nothing.

MEL (CONT'D)

Wilson, Lily -

(to Dale)

Can you see them?

DALE

No. No, they're gone. We have to leave, now.

Mel, realizing that they're gone.

DALE (CONT'D)

(to Mel)

Let's go, come on!

As Mel is out of earshot, the radio. Crackling.

LILY (V.O.)

Help - hiding near - the rocks -

Dale looks over, sees the rock and their boat. Sees Lily waving frantically at them. They lock eyes. The monster, right behind them. A choice.

Dale says nothing and they speed away, a rumbling SCREECH from underneath them.

FADE OUT.

Fear of the Sacred

“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay,
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?”

— *Paradise Lost* X.743-5

Epigraph to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Religion has a long and complex history with monsters.

The above excerpt from John Milton’s epic poem echoes theodical questions which plague the creature in Shelley’s novel. In creating the monster, Victor Frankenstein is playing at being God. And that, rather than the actions of the monster, is where the true horror of the story hides. The biblical allusions in this classic horror text are integral to understanding the fear which underlies it, and the same is true for many tales of terror.

Creation stories and systems of faith have been entangled with ideas of the monstrous since ancient times. Demonic forces, horrifying mutants, and otherworldly creatures come to Earth to punish humans have featured in almost every major world religion, from Medusa to nephilim to the flying spaghetti monster. It makes sense — if there is to be a divine, sacred deity to be worshipped, there must be a dark antithesis.

A common figure which appears in many Near Eastern and ancient Indian religions is a deity which represents chaos. This figure must be defeated by another to maintain order, and in

many cases the body or bones of these creatures then become the basis for creating the cosmos. Religious studies scholar Timothy Beal describes these figures as “chaos monsters,” which represent a “radical otherness appearing within the order of things” (Beal 10). Beal asserts that the presence of these chaos monsters suggests that insecurities about the order of the cosmos are built into religion itself. Chaos monsters exist to define ethical behaviors, enforce the power of the residing religious authority, and to warn us of and explain unseen forces.

Sin, criminal activity, or immoral behaviours otherwise not sanctioned by the principles of the residing religious faith are often discouraged by citing monstrous consequences for the offender. The preta from Indian folklore, for example, are hungry spirits who are doomed to wander around, perpetually starving. These spirits were once greedy and corrupt people in real life, but joined this fleet of monsters after death. Judeo-Christian texts, meanwhile, clearly warn that the life of a sinner will end in fiery demonic punishment in Hell. In this way, religion acts as part of a social pedagogy, enforcing what society views as “good” and “bad” behavior.

Religion presents itself as a haven from these monstrous beings, promising order and control in return for faith and adherence to religious principles. The solution to being rid of a demon, these narratives suggest, is to embrace religious authorities — look no further than *The Exorcist* (1973), *Insidious* (2010) or any recent horror movie which recruits a spiritual figure perform an exorcism.

Yet for philosopher Bertrand Russell, religion itself is almost entirely based on fear. In a 1927 lecture to the National Secular Society, Russell clarified that “it is partly the terror of the

unknown and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing — fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death” (Russel, 1927). From this viewpoint, Russell sees fear as both the basis of religion and a symptom of it.

Indeed, both Beal and cultural scholar Stephen Asma view religion as experiences of divine horror, evoking feelings of awe and terror. Monsters are both deified and demonized, revealing a deep sense of ambivalence about the role of monsters in religious texts. The leviathan of the Hebrew bible, for example, is depicted as a terrible serpent which must be slain. Yet other descriptions of the beast describe it as having a close relationship to God, presenting it as an otherworldly, sacred figure.

Perhaps retreating into faith is not the only answer to these theological horrors. German filmmaker Fred Keleman sees cinematic horror as being related to our primitive attempts to capture and describe religious monsters. By painting an image of a demon on a cave wall, or by conjuring the supernatural to the screen, we reduce its power, its unknowability, to something contained within an image, he posits. And once the unknown demonic force is caught on camera, its demise becomes imminent.

Despite growing secularism in the modern world, we are still haunted by supernatural terror. Witches, demons, ghouls and other beings are pervasive across storytelling media today. The frightening power of the unknown, of unanswered existential questions, conjure the beasts which crawl from our nightmares and pull us into the dark.

Enlightenment

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

Address
Phone
E-mail

FADE IN:

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Thick white smoke curls in the air, lifts, dances.

A CRACKLING FIRE can be heard. There's a voice--

HINDU PRIEST (O.S.)
Phir se shuddh chal sakata hai...

At the fire half a dozen MOURNERS dressed in white, all men. They recite the words with the HINDU PRIEST, whose voice leads them.

HINDU PRIEST (CONT'D)
Phir se shuddh chal sakata hai...

Only one mourner refuses to join the mantra: the silent woman, ANALA, 29. She stares directly ahead. Unreadable.

Her eight-year-old son, TARUN, quiet and grubby, looks up at her. Taking his chance, he pulls a pair of beaten-up GLASSES from his pocket. Glances at them.

He stuffs them back in his pocket before Anala looks over and sees.

The smoke is everywhere now. Clouding vision.

Anala pulls Tarun close, a protective arm around his shoulders.

A FACE, eyes and mouth closed, thin white cloth wrapped around it.

It's a man - a BODY - and it lies on top of a FUNERAL PYRE.

The source of the smoke, which wisps around the body. The fire reaches between the man's fingers--

EXT. RIVER - DUSK

A small boat glides through the river.

FIGURE #1 controls the direction of the boat goes with a long stick. FIGURE #2 leans over the side of the boat with a big clay pot.

FIGURE #2 opens it, spilling the ashes into the water.

INT. FAMILY HOME - DAY - LIVING ROOM

NEIGHBORS, FRIENDS, FAMILY MEMBERS mingle throughout the house - this is a time for unity. Other households have brought the grieving family plates upon plates of food for the week - all stacked on the central table.

A WOMAN WITH LONG HAIR gives Anala a dish, and chatters away. Anala's mind is clearly elsewhere.

ANALA
(gesturing with the dish)
I will be back in a moment.

Anala brings the dish into the

KITCHEN

Where Tarun sits at a table, stacked high with plates of food and flowers. Tarun sits on his feet to see over the table.

In his hands, under the table: the GLASSES

Anala hands the dish to DADI: late sixties, earnest and the light of the family. This is Tarun's grandmother.

Dadi lifts the lid off the dish plate and sniffs it. She makes a face.

DADI
Is this from that awful woman down the street? I haven't forgotten the taste of the last dish she brought over...

Anala sighs and leaves the kitchen.

Dadi goes through the dishes, peeking at what has been brought over. She stops at one and smiles at her grandson.

DADI (CONT'D)
Looks like Aunty brought biryani.

Tarun doesn't look at her.

DADI (CONT'D)
Biryani! That won't last long with you here, will it? No, I bet you as soon as I turn my back...

She turns. After a moment, she spins back around. Feigns shock and throws up her hands.

DADI (CONT'D)

It's still here! I cannot believe it, my grandson must have left and been replaced by this new child.

Tarun can't help the smile that bubbles up.

Dadi, hands on hips, job accomplished.

Anala rushes in with another plate of food. She sets it on the table.

DADI (CONT'D)

(to Anala)

My dear, I have to inform you that this cannot be your son, sitting here. Tarun would never leave a whole plate of biryani sitting out here like this.

Anala almost smiles--

--until she sees the pair of glasses in Tarun's hands.

Her expression goes cold. She snatches the glasses from him.

ANALA

Why do you have these?

Shocked, not expecting to be caught, Turin can't speak. Dadi freezes too.

When Anala doesn't get an answer, she takes her son by the hand and marches him through the kitchen door

OUTSIDE

To where the house meets the woods.

Dadi watches them through the window.

Anala HURLS the glasses into the trees. They hit a rock and the glass SPLITS.

Anala is breathing quickly. She spins to Tarun, bringing her face to his level so that he understands.

ANALA (CONT'D)

We **can't** have his things in the house. It's bad.

TARUN

Why?

ANALA

It just is. It's not... clean.

She sees that he doesn't understand. Can't understand. She takes his face in her hands gently, earnestly.

ANALA (CONT'D)

You need to just trust me. You are the most important thing in the world to me, Tarun, you're my son. I will always be on your side. Can you promise to trust me?

Tarun, still confused, nods. He won't let her down.

Anala hugs him, and turns to walk back inside. There's a SCURRYING noise. Tarun glances back at the woods--

--for half a second, almost imagined--

--two RED EYES blink back at him from beyond.

Then it's gone.

INT. FAMILY HOME - KITCHEN - DAY

Dadi dips her fingers in a bowl of water and sprinkles it around the room.

Anala ushers Tarun inside.

ANALA

Stay here with Dadi.

Anala leaves, and Tarun watches Dadi as she finishes the ritual.

DADI

Would you like to join me, *pota*?

Tarun climbs back onto his chair and crosses his arms.

TARUN

She threw his glasses away.

DADI

I saw.

TARUN

It's not fair. I was playing. I don't throw away her things.

DADI

Do you know what I'm doing, Tarun?

TARUN

She should not have taken them.

DADI

(holds up the bowl)

You haven't seen this before?

It takes a moment, but Tarun's curiosity wins over.

TARUN

What is it?

DADI

This is purifying water. I'm
cleansing the home so we don't have
bad spirits.

(a pause)

You know where your father is now,
yes?

TARUN

He is moving on. To his next life.

DADI

That's right. What we do in this
life determines what kind of future
life we will have. A life full of
good actions will receive good
fortune. A life full of bad actions
will not. You should listen to your
mother.

Through the kitchen doorway:

Tarun glimpses Anala pulling her sleeves down to hide an ugly
scar on her forearm and talking to another woman.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

SUPER: 13 days later.

A simple, sand-colored temple. Two small figures walk towards
it: Anala and Tarun. Anala wears a white sari, a clear
resolve. Tarun runs behind her.

TARUN

Will we pray for father today?

ANALA

Hush.

INT. TEMPLE - DAY

The temple is clean and sparse. Incense sticks fill sections of the room with a light smokey haze. The interior is tan-colored save for statues of vibrant deities, standing tall, decorated and proud.

Tarun takes them in, wide-eyed. Anala talks with the Hindu Priest, dressed in traditional clothes.

ANALA

...I cannot tell you how badly I've wished to return here for the last thirteen days, for some solitude...

A breeze whispers through the doorway, catching Tarun's attention.

HINDU PRIEST

... and your food supply is plentiful? I am pleased you feel ready for the purification of temple...

Something flickers at the edge of the doorway. A piece of fabric? Tarun steps towards it cautiously.

ANALA

Tarun.

He spins to her.

TARUN

Can I play outside?

INT. TEMPLE - DAY

Anala sits on the floor, deep in prayer, eyes closed.

OUTSIDE

Tarun also sits on the ground, cross legged, concentrating. But his eyes are open. He's studying the ground.

The Hindu Priest sits on a stone seat, dozing off.

Tarun stands, runs off to get something. He brings back a stick. Places it on the ground, the final piece of his creation...

It's the arm of a pair of glasses, made from sticks and stones. In fact, it's a whole man made of sticks and stones.

Tarun looks at it. He misses his dad.

The SCURRYING noise again.

Tarun JUMPS, spins around.

Nothing. The Hindu Priest is asleep now.

Tarun frowns, musters up some courage.

TARUN

Come out.

Tarun picks up the biggest stick from his collection and holds it out like a weapon.

He steps quietly, deliberately, around the corner of the temple. With one daring breath--

--he LEAPS around the corner, stick at the ready.

Nothing.

Tarun straightens. Frowns. Walks back to the front of the temple. The still-sleeping Priest. The quiet entrance.

He sits at his stick masterpiece again, but it has CHANGED.

The stick and stone glasses have been replaced by--

His father's glasses. One lens broken from being tossed in the forest.

Tarun grabs them, LEAPS UP! Stick held out like a weapon!

TARUN (CONT'D)

COME OUT!!

HINDU PRIEST

Keep your voice down.

The priest stretches, having just woken up.

TARUN

You need to get my mother.

HINDU PRIEST

I will not disturb a person in prayer, child. Sit down.

Tarun looks inside the temple. Assesses how much trouble he could get in for this. Then, stick in hand, he DARTS INSIDE.

IN THE TEMPLE

TARUN

Mother!!

Anala's eyes snap open. She grabs his arm as he runs at her.

ANALA

Tarun you cannot run shouting
inside a temple...

TARUN

Father is here. I heard him.

Her eyes lock onto the broken glasses in his hand. A flash of anger.

ANALA

You brought that in here!?

She remembers the sacred space she is in and takes a breath to calm herself. She pulls him gently to sit on the floor and takes the glasses from his hands.

TARUN

Dadi said if we do good things in
this life, we will be rewarded in
the next.

ANALA

Then your father will be suffering
greatly.

A flicker of hurt and misunderstanding on Tarun's face. On Anala: maybe she should not have said that.

The Hindu Priest enters.

ANALA (CONT'D)

Would you watch over him? I need
the fresh air.

The Hindu Priest nods, takes a seat at the back of the room.

ANALA (CONT'D)

(to Tarun)

Sit here. Pray for the family you
still have.

With a loving touch of his shoulder, she exits with the glasses.

The Hindu Priest tends to the burning sticks, then bows his head to pray.

Tarun furrows his brow, closes his eyes, concentrates. Then, a faint

WHISPERING.

Tarun tries to ignore it. That SCURRYING noise again.

WHISPERING (V.O.)
Beta. Beta. Son.

It gets LOUDER.

And Tarun tries to pretend he can't hear it, but it's unavoidable--

He opens his eyes.

Nothing. Again. He looks around the room. The Hindu Priest is undisturbed. The tall statues of deities are still. But nestled among them is something UNNATURAL--

--A HORRIFIC RED FACE, BULGING EYES, A CANNIBALISTIC GRIN.

And it is fixed on Tarun.

He YELPS, jumps up, and it is gone.

That SCURRYING NOISE, and seven BLACK BEETLES emerge from the deities.

Tarun backs away, grabs onto the shoulder of the Hindu Priest, who turns to him--

--and SNARLS, with eyes that GLOW SILVER--

Behind him, more and more smoke billows from the smoking sticks.

The doors SLAM closed.

Tarun spins towards the door, but is blocked by a large man -
- who looks a lot like him. Tarun recognizes him immediately and freezes.

TARUN'S FATHER, whole and healthy. He smiles.

TARUN'S FATHER
Tarun. I have been looking for you.

He kneels, arms outstretched for a hug. There is a POUNDING at the closed door.

ANALA (O.S.)

Tarun! Why are the doors closed?
Tarun?

Tarun isn't sure what to do.

TARUN'S FATHER

Were you praying for me? Making
sure my journey was safe? You did a
good job, Tarun. I have been
rewarded in this new life.

The pounding at the door stops. Tarun grips the stick he had
earlier behind him.

TARUN'S FATHER (CONT'D)

What is wrong? You had no trouble
speaking your mind at the
neighbor's house that night.

EXT. TARUN'S HOME - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

The front door of the house. The sounds of a scuffle inside.

ANALA'S VOICE (O.S.)

Stop it! Stop! Help! Stop!

Tarun's head peeks around the door from the inside, and he's
TERRIFIED. He glances behind him, and BOLTS down the road to
the nearest house.

END FLASHBACK.

A knife's-edge smile from Tarun's Father. He reaches out a
hand to his son.

TARUN'S FATHER

But I forgive you, *beta*. Come with
me. We could spend eternity in the
light.

The Hindu Priest is huddled in the corner, blank-faced.

ANALA'S VOICE (O.S.)

Tarun! You must not do what he
says! You promised, remember what
we said?

Tarun stares at his father's outstretched hand.

He takes a step backwards.

The change in Tarun's Father is instant.

His face darkens with rage, his mouth down-turning beyond a natural expression. His fingers begin to SMOKE and CRACKLE, blackening like charcoal.

He LUNGES for Tarun, who ducks and--

--JABS him with the stick!

There's a SQUELCH as it lands in his stomach.

Tarun's Father HOWLS.

He pulls the stick out, and a belly full of WORMS slop onto the temple floor.

Tarun runs to the Hindu Priest and tries to SHAKE him awake. The Priest stares blankly ahead. He starts babbling nonsense...

HINDU PRIEST

Ah traxel manta sim fah traxel...

There's the ROAR OF FLAME, and then the creature is just

RED EYES and

CHAOS and

TEETH

And it's staring at Tarun.

A VIPER-LIKE TONGUE darts through sharpened teeth. The demon stalks towards Tarun.

A FIRE sparks from the demon's fingertips, and he sends flames licking up one of the walls.

Legs shaking, Tarun stands. Gathers courage.

TARUN

You do not belong here.

The demon LAUGHS.

It's raspy and low, and it sends shivers through Tarun.

The fire has started to eat through the roof. A wood beam CRASHES down.

TARUN (CONT'D)

(shouting)

You are impure!

The demon grabs the boy by his sides and LIFTS HIM in the air!

SIX BLACK ARMS, crackled and hissing, appear to unfold from the demon's torso. The demon gnashes his teeth.

DEMON/TARUN'S FATHER

Your mother thinks she can have you. But you are always *mine*.

Tarun, tear-stained, kicks to try and get free.

The door CRASHES open. ANALA is covered in soot.

She meets eyes with the demon.

The Hindu Priest slowly rises from the floor, eyes glowing silver.

He RUSHES at Anala, attacks her!

The demon turns his attention back to Tarun, and tucks him under his arm. He starts towards the door.

Anala is barely fending off the Hindu Priest. She sees the demon leaving.

ANALA

NO!

She gathers the strength to PUSH the Hindu Priest, who topples over just long enough for her to take out her husband's glasses and--

--THROW THEM IN THE FIRE.

They warp on the flames.

The Demon doubles over, clutching his decaying torso with all six arms.

Tarun drops to the ground.

A HISS, and red eyes meet Anala's. Something passes between them that is beyond our understanding.

The demon evaporates into SMOKE.

Anala helps the Hindu Priest to his feet, runs to pick up her son. Ushers them outside.

Anala looks back at the decaying devil. Their eyes meet briefly before she leaves.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

A safe distance from the burning temple, Anala supports the Hindu Priest as he walks, dazed and with normal brown eyes.

Tarun huddles in her other arm. She kisses his forehead. Exhales as he clings onto her arm for comfort.

Relief. Freedom. She **won**.

She looks ahead to a clearing, towards the village in the distance. It's only a short walk now.

Anala smiles at the camera. And for a moment, there's a SILVER GLINT to her eyes.

FADE OUT.

Fear of Science

“The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race... it would take off on its own, and re-design itself at an ever increasing rate.”

— Stephen Hawking

In January of 2015, Elon Musk, Stephen Hawking, and dozens of experts signed an open letter requesting further research on the societal impacts of artificial intelligence. The letter called for research in strategies to avoid creating something that could not be controlled. This modern anxiety about the future of technology is not a new phenomenon — in fact, humanity was worried about the dangers of science well before the twenty-first century.

The late eighteenth century saw scientific advancements in our understanding of the natural world, as well as discoveries in electricity, chemistry, and steam power. With it, came a wave of speculation as to where these discoveries might lead. From the corpse reanimation in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to the chemical split of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, fears of science were pervasive. The “mad scientist” figure was popularized, sparking tales of experiments gone wrong with unforeseen consequences wreaking havoc on society. The public was fascinated by zoological mutants and abnormal animal births following the publication of Charles Darwin’s work, and false reports of hybrid animals caused excitement and horror, sparking discussions on what it means to be human in a new biological context. In the United States, carnivals and “freak shows” made exhibitions of individuals with biological abnormalities and conditions such as microcephaly and vitiligo, often reinforcing racist and ableist concepts of white biological superiority. These exhibitions included individuals such as

Saartjie Baartman of South Africa, whose stage name was the ‘Hottentot Venus.’ Baartman was paraded around Europe, objectified for her large buttocks and skin coloring. By the early twentieth century, sideshows featuring the monstrous “other” and descriptions of scientific abnormalities inspired both wonder and terror in audiences.

In the wake of the devastating and long-lasting effects of the atomic bomb in Japan, another monster of science emerged from the ashes. Gojira (which became Godzilla to Western audiences) had skin which resembled the keloid scars of Hiroshima bombing survivors, breathed an intense heat beam which was generated from nuclear energy inside the creature. It stood as a symbol for Japan’s fears of nuclear attacks and panic (Lee).

Meanwhile, monstrous mutations of the 1950s and ‘60s made their way into comic books, where villains were often created by coming into contact with toxic substances or via unethical experimentation. Fears of experimentation or deadly substances were not without their real life foundations. The Tuskegee Experiments used black males as test subjects to track the progression of syphilis, providing no treatment as the men died, experienced blindness or mental health issues. Just a decade or two earlier, secret government programs experimented on U.S. troops with mustard gas, while Nazi medical experiments caused worldwide outrage. These real life scenarios revealed that the public should not merely be afraid of scientific revelation itself; the intent of the scientist and the weaponization of that knowledge is enough to be frightening.

This same fear persists today. The television series *Black Mirror* explores how technology, though not inherently destructive, can be harmful when used by humans. The

episode “The Entire History of You” shows how having digital access to revisiting your own memories, and those of others, radically alters how humans form and maintain relationships. As the oft-quoted Ian Malcolm says in 1993’s *Jurassic Park*, “your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should.” We can create A.I. technologies and digital experiences, but the long-term consequences of these advances remain to be seen.

In 2017, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* hosted an unusual guest — Sophia, a social humanoid robot who uses AI systems to mimic human expressions, respond with a robotic voice, and develop social relationships. Since her first appearance on the show, the robot has become a legal citizen, spoken at the U.N., and been on the cover of magazines. What makes watching Sophia’s interactions so unsettling is that it forces us to consider what it means to be human in this new technological landscape. If complex human consciousness can be created by simply assembling machine parts, how does that change the essence of what we are?

From robots to virtual reality, it’s clear that we fear how technology might infringe upon our ability to identify ourselves as human. If the fears of Musk and Hawking are realized and AI intelligence surpasses humanity’s, where does that leave us? How will the increased digitization of our lives alter the meaning of them? Perhaps Mary Shelley put it best, warning, “supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.” But as for how far our curiosity will take us, we likely won’t know until the monsters we’ve created are already out of our control.

Human Matter

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

Address
Phone
E-mail

FADE IN:

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

Quiet. Dark. A dozen or so RVs scattered across the lawn. Only one RV has its lights on. It is parked next to a small brick office building.

LINDSEY (V.O.)
We've all lost something.

INT. VEE'S RV - NIGHT

Sitting next to the window a woman. VEE, 24, white-blond hair, her face completely focused and lit by moonlight.

LINDSEY (V.O.)
And when nature takes those things
away...

Vee, using tweezers, inches a small chip underneath the skin of her forearm.

LINDSEY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
...the world looks to us for
solutions.

As the chip wiggles in, a FLASH --

-- blue lines trace the length of her arm and each finger, RIPPLE underneath her skin and disappear.

LINDSEY (V.O.) (CONT'D)
New limbs, new movements, new life.
You show us how we can be better.

Vee grabs her phone. Her home screen is a photo of her with a slightly older man with the same white-blond hair, both laughing.

She unlocks the phone to access a blue diagram of a hand and forearm. She touches her finger on screen, and it curls, following her movement.

Her real finger does the same.

Vee allows herself an almost imperceptible smile.

INT. UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM GRADUATION CEREMONY - DAY

A DOZEN GRADUATES, in caps and gowns, bunched at the front of the auditorium. All looking up at -

- LINDSEY, 32, medical engineering legend. An alumna, proud to be back, beaming at the graduating class. Really believing her words.

LINDSEY

Five years ago, I was sitting in those same seats you're in. Since then, I've pioneered the movement in life-enhancing predictive AI, studied under the best neurologists in the world... and given Dean Harmon use of his hands back.

At the end of the stage, DEAN HARMON, cheery man in his mid-60s, smiles and wiggles his fingers 'hello' at the audience. A faint blue ripple under his skin, if you look closely.

LINDSEY (CONT'D)

Five years since I completed my classes and independent study. I started where you started. So in five years from now... how will you have changed the world?

APPLAUSE, CHEERS from the AUDIENCE of relatives, parents, professors.

At the end of the row of graduates, in the dark auditorium corner, is Vee. Watching closely.

INT. BACKSTAGE HALLWAY - DAY

Vee pushes past some graduates, searching the room until she zeros in on the guest of honor. But Lindsey is chatting with Dean Harmon at the end of the hallway.

Vee stops, checks her phone. When she looks up, someone is standing next to her.

STEPHEN, 28, white-blond hair hands in pockets of his jeans - the person from Vee's phone screen. You can almost hear the grin under his words when he speaks.

STEPHEN

Wow. Our days of avoiding the real world are over. Hashtag hire me.

Vee glowers.

On the other side of the room, Lindsey and Dean Harmon are laughing. Vee approaches, all smiles.

VEE

Vee Fowler.
(puts her hand out to
shake)
I've been following your work.
Self-aware prosthetic limbs.
Predictive AI. Brilliant.

Lindsey, used to the admiration, shakes Vee's hand politely.

LINDSEY

Thank you.

Dean Harmon beams, proud. He lightly touches Lindsey's arm.

DEAN HARMON

I'll catch you at the faculty
lunch.

He waddles away.

VEE

I based my independent study on the
same technology you developed here.

LINDSEY

That's very flattering. What
exactly is your research on?

VEE

Actually, you should come see for
yourself. If you're in town for a
few more days. It would be an
honor.

Lindsey can't help herself. She smiles.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - DUSK

Vee, standing outside her RV. Waiting. She looks up.

The sky is gun-metal grey. About to rain.

She pulls out her phone. Stephen appears.

STEPHEN

At this point, we might as well
stop showering. I know
@DannyKirkland is already way ahead
of us on that front.

On Vee's phone: Stephen's Twitter page. His tweets are each of his lines of dialogue so far, including what he just said.

A car rolls up and parks in front of the RV. Stephen is GONE.

Vee puts her phone away as Lindsey steps out of the driver's seat.

LINDSEY

Hey! God it's gloomy out!

VEE

Glad you made it.

Vee leads her to the RV and unlocks the door.

INT. TRAILER - DUSK

With the lights on, it seems like less of a mobile home and more of a mobile hospital: drips, computer monitors, large machines whirring.

To the side is a small sink, a fridge, a microwave. A large window.

And in the center, on a table -

- a BODY. Stephen's body, bare from the waist up, a tube taped over his mouth. Dozens of other wires attached to his chest, and a few small scars.

Vee watches Lindsey's reaction carefully. In case she has to kick her out.

Lindsey takes it all in, eyes travelling over the wires, dissecting the process, studying.

Lindsey picks up a wire. She taps lightly on Stephen's forearm, and blue lines run quickly underneath his skin, then fade away.

LINDSEY

Who is this?

VEE

He's brain dead. Dedicated himself to science.

LINDSEY

He looks like you.

She taps Stephen's temple. Lines trace his eyelids and jaw.

LINDSEY (CONT'D)

Are all the limbs self-aware?

Vee picks up a lighter, presses it next to Stephen's arm and flicks it on. His arm flinches away from the flame.

VEE

They move when they sense pain. And I can control them remotely, of course. But the ultimate challenge is giving control back to the brain.

Vee pulls a monitor forward, displaying images of a brain scan. Two small grey SQUARES lodged in the brain.

VEE (CONT'D)

This is why I needed you. To see if it would be possible.

Lindsey squints at the screen, interpreting the diagrams. She chews her lip.

LINDSEY

Hypothetically, I think it works.
Hypothetically.

Vee, shallow breaths, tries to hide her excitement.

VEE

And you don't think it would damage the neural pathways?

LINDSEY

Oh, there would be significant damage. But the body would move. And the brain would be moving it.

Lindsey at the monitor, still taking in all of this twisted work.

LINDSEY (CONT'D)

What's this?

She points to a tiny area red - brain activity.

VEE

Just interference.

LINDSEY

Because if there's brain activity, real brain activity, that means he's -

VEE

He's very much brain dead.
Medically, legally,
philosophically. You think I
wouldn't have extensive testing for
that?

LINDSEY

Okay, yes, sorry. But I just - if
he's brain dead, what exactly are
you restoring?

Vee stares. Like the answer is obvious.

VEE

Life.

Lindsey looks over Stephen's body, unsure.

The lights in the trailer flicker.

VEE (CONT'D)

Sorry. You'll have to get going.
Sometimes we have outages. I'll
need to go check on the outlets.

LINDSEY

He's not hooked up to -

VEE

The life support runs off my
private generator.

Lindsey nods, takes a last look at the body on the table.
Another flicker of the light and she moves towards the door.

LINDSEY

Well. I'm looking forward to
reading about your findings. You're
definitely reaching into new
territory.

VEE

We're scientists. Isn't that always
the whole idea?

Lindsey smiles - not quite agreeing - and leaves. Vee closes
the door behind her. Waits for one, two, three -

Lindsey's ENGINE starts up.

Vee turns around and runs a hand through her hair. Then, a
rare sunshine-bright smile. Incredulous.

She rushes to a monitor and starts typing away. Quick flashes of tweets and comments and messages appear, whizzing by -

- each said aloud by a healthy, grinning version of Stephen, who appears behind Vee.

STEPHEN

(as text flies past,
overlapping)

"Legit do not understand this whole flat Earth theory. Hello? Ever seen the horizon?" "Can we please stop pretending pajamas work as normal clothes?" "So ready for Fridayyyyy" "You're really going for a run during a thunderstorm? You're cuckoo for cocoa puffs, pal."

Vee, the energy growing. This is what she's been waiting for.

The healthy Stephen disappears. The lights flicker.

Vee takes two small wires from the monitor and gently, carefully attaches them to Stephen's forehead.

VEE

I'll bring you back, Stephen. Dumb tweets and all.

The lights go out completely.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The lights flicker out.

Behind a cluster of trees is Lindsey. She watches a flashlight circle around the interior of the RV.

Vee emerges outside, holding a high-powered flashlight. She follows the power cable from the trailer around the corner of the brick building.

INT. TRAILER - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Lindsey steps into the dark RV.

Tiny blue and green lights fade in and out, beeping. Like little eyes, watching Lindsey in the dark.

Lindsey moves carefully through the space, up to one of the monitors. She pulls up the images of the brain scans. Staring at that small yellow area of activity.

Lindsay takes out her phone, makes a call.

LINDSAY

Dean Harmon. I need you to help me
move a patient.

(pause)

Yeah, I'll text you the address -

Behind her, SPARKS! Flying from one of the machines!

Lindsay hangs up the phone and SPINS -

- a dark figure, rising from the table, reaching towards her-

- a MONSTER emerging from the dark.

Lindsay GASPS, stumbles backward, tripping into equipment.

LINDSAY (CONT'D)

Light!

A light shines from her phone, illuminating Stephen. He's
awake, his expression vacant.

He squints, a soft whirring as his pupils narrow to adjust to
the light. Tubes and wires still connecting him to the table.

He pulls the tube from his mouth, tugging at the tape. Tests
his jaw movement before speaking.

STEPHEN

Year.

Lindsay shines the light into Stephen's face. It doesn't seem
to bother him. Lindsey tries to remain calm.

LINDSAY

What?

Stephen blinks once, twice. Processing.

Four columns of numbers appear on screen. Each column flips
through numbers until they land on "2042."

STEPHEN

It's twenty forty-two. The year.
Two thousand and forty-two.

LINDSEY

Okay, sit back down for me. You
shouldn't be moving.

Lindsey guides him back to the table, as if this is just any
other patient and she is on autopilot.

Stephen watches her, analyses her. White lines measure up Lindsey's face, framing it as small rectangles identify her eyes.

A rolodex of photographs, all faces of similar-looking women, fly past -

- until Stephen lands on a photo of Lindsey. The lines turn green. A match.

Now, headlines and chunks of articles and text fly past. "Biomechanical breakthrough," "A.I. could save this amputee" "Happy Birthday, Lin!" and "Professional bio..."

Stephen's eyes, darting around, taking it in. He fixes on Lindsey.

STEPHEN

You're a doctor.

Lindsey is taken aback.

LINDSEY

Yes.

STEPHEN

You went to the same school as my sister.

(a pause)

I'm not sick.

LINDSEY

You need to lie down.

A POP and the lights are back on.

Stephen closes his eyes briefly, sits back up. Opens them. Staring into space.

LINDSEY (CONT'D)

She'll be back soon. We have to go.

STEPHEN

You're taking me away?

Lindsey starts unplugging wires and tubes from Stephen.

LINDSEY

You're awake and you're moving. You have sufficient brain activity...she had no right to do this to you in the first place.

STEPHEN

You're cuckoo for cocoa puffs, pal.
Of course she did, she's my sister.

Lindsey stops.

LINDSEY

(pales)

Oh. She didn't get approval for
this.

She rubs her nose. Stephen is silent. Lindsey checks her
phone. Starts ushering Stephen outside.

LINDSEY (CONT'D)

Okay. We have to go.

STEPHEN

What? No!

Stephen struggles.

LINDSEY

She's altered your mind using
stolen equipment. We won't know
what was done to you, not until we
get you to a hospital -

STEPHEN

I'm a processing system, I don't
need a hospital - Stephen was
already dead, and she made me from
what was left behind! Tweets,
posts, messages, voicemails! I'm an
algorithm - I'm a miracle -

LINDSEY

You're not whole.

Lindsey shoves him off of her, he stumbles. Reeling, a
dangerous glint in his eye.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

Vee walks around the corner towards the RV, its windows
illuminated by the light from inside.

Vee stops short at the sight of it.

There's a FIGURE, a silhouette.

All of Vee's hopes, right there, finally, standing upright. We see it on her face: the elation, the joy, the success at bringing her brother back.

She moves towards the trailer, faster and faster -

A CRASH and a MALE SCREAM.

Vee stops, her eyes wide -

FADE OUT.

Fear of Others

“We told you we had living, breathing monstrosities. You laughed at them, shuddered at them; and yet, but for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are.”

— Horror Cinema and the Avant Garde

Perhaps no other fear is as present in our current collective consciousness than the fear of the ‘Other.’ The fracturing of political identities, the resurgence of white nationalism, and the struggle to find identity in a new digital era has resulted in a perception of the mass Other — a morally corrupt group led by impulsive and destructive ideologies which, due to their number and perceived radical differences from the norm, threaten to throw the world into chaos.

As posited by this thesis, monsters represent prejudices, power dynamics, and our deepest societal fears. The Other has always been feared, the idea of a creature or group which can be identified as decidedly not human. History is littered with instances where those in power adopted monstrous imagery to describe groups which they saw as inferior. This section of the thesis not only examines how collective thought can ostracize and demonize a group, but also takes a look at the reasons for making monsters out of humans.

From Ancient Greece to the modern United States, fears of the monstrous Other bound communities together through shared narratives. Stephen T. Asma explains that as ancient cultures came into contact with each other through trade, xenophobic fears of outsiders inspired tales of monstrous societies — ones where people grew tails or wings.

Early European explorers saw native people as being “steeped in vices and bestialities” and brought back tales of their ‘inhuman appetites’ and ‘perverse morality’ (Poole 31). Legends

such as the Deer Woman during the colonial era warned of the “savage” impulses of Native Americans, furthering racist ideology and providing a moral justification for the oppression of this group. The story popularized the racist trope of a monstrous outsider corrupting the purity of a white woman.

Similarly, white slave owners used monster imagery to rationalize and legitimize pro-slavery arguments. African slaves were viewed as possessing demonic connections, cannibalistic savagery, and genetic inferiority. Many slave owners used these racist beliefs as a way to soothe potential anxieties about the morality of the slave trade. As historical scholar Scott Poole writes, “monsters have offered a way to ignore historical trauma and historical guilt, to remake the facts into a set of pleasing legends. The grotesquerie of the monster has offered relief from the gruesome facts of history” (Poole 33).

The slave trade was no less monstrous from an African perspective. Historian John Thornton notes that in West African folklore, the color white is associated with death, bringing an added aura of supernatural horror to those who enslaved them (Poole 47). In one account, African slaves were horrified to see their captors were drinking red wine. Unfamiliar with the drink, they assumed they were drinking the blood of other African victims, like vampires.

Discriminatory comparisons of the Other to monsters evolved to reflect time periods. In the late 1800s, U.S. Senator Ben Tillman, in a speech defending the practice of lynching, referred to the black male as “a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour.” In the 1930s and ‘40s, James Whale’s *Frankenstein* showed an angry mob chasing after the frightened monster with

torches — a scene not too dissimilar from the crowds which persecuted African Americans during lynchings. More recently, political discourse has reflected white fears of the ethnically diverse Other. White nationalist ideology from lawmakers can be seen as a manifestation of these fears, as illustrated through enacting a ban on Muslims entering the United States and strict anti-immigration policies at the border of Mexico.

Fears of the Other induces imagery of a group lost to mindless conformity, an idea which is perfectly represented by the zombie. Hungry for brains and ready to convert you at any moment, zombies are one of the only monsters to present themselves as part of a group, rather than a singular threat. Zombies evolved from Haitian belief systems, and were sensationalized by the Western world, drawing clear parallels between the lack of autonomy of Haitian slaves and the zombie. From *Game of Thrones* to *The Walking Dead*, it's clear that our fear of losing agency to zombies, to the Other, is present today. Zombie films have more than doubled in the last two decades, reflecting this fear (Crockett 2016). USC professor Leo Braudy says that the reason for this is because of a growing fear of groups. Zombies “might be Islamic fundamentalists, immigrants, Republicans, Democrats — you name it, whatever group frightens you” (Bell 2017).

Yet more frightening than the group itself is what it might reveal about ourselves. If we aren't careful, our condemnation of the Other may lead us down our own monstrous paths.

The Rotters

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A sweet, jazzy 1920's melody plays from a gramophone.

At a cramped kitchen table, a FATHER and SON. A dim light overhead. The father, PHILLIP, digs into a plate of mashed potatoes, peas and chicken. The son, LEON, picks at his.

Sounds of the city below them.

At the empty chair between them, a framed photograph of a smiling young WOMAN, mid 30's, smiling.

Leon eyes it.

LEON

It wouldn't... look like her, would
it? If we saw it?

Phillip pauses. Wipes his mouth.

PHILLIP

I'm not sure.

Leon stares at his plate.

There's a THUD from below.

Then a SCREAM.

Phillip and Leon exchange a look, then snap into action.

They each snatch up SHOTGUNS propped up on the wall beside them. Abandoning dinner, Phillip turns off the dim gas light.

More SCREAMS from below, more CRASHING and ugly, gnashing SNARLS.

The two of them, standing ready with shotguns aimed at the door. Ready for whatever will come through.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

A young, angry face, blinking against the breeze.

CHARLIE, eerily serious for a 13-year-old, in simple cotton clothes and still holding on to that last bit of baby fat in his face.

He holds a metal bucket.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

He's walking, and tossing heavy objects on the ground. We don't see what they are.

The RATTLE of a car engine. Charlie looks up.

-- a black 1920's style car, SPEEDING down a dirt path in the distance.

It reaches a simple white HOUSE and slows to a halt.

Charlie stops walking. He shields his eyes from the sun, squinting to see --

-- two FIGURES, dressed finely in well-tailored suits and tan fedoras exit the vehicle. They each take two large suitcases out from the back seat.

Charlie looks down at his metal bucket. He takes the last large slab of RAW MEAT out and tosses it into the dirt with one last --

-- THUD.

INT. HOUSE - AMY'S BEDROOM - DAY

A drab room with plain walls, a simple single bed and a window. This is the attic, but it has been converted to a bedroom.

AMY, 15, powder blue cotton dress and in a nervous rush, searches through a dresser drawer. She pulls out a compact mirror, pops open a tube of lipstick.

The sound of a car door SNAPPING shut.

Amy startles. She dabs color onto her lips, shapes it, glances quickly out of the window.

OUTSIDE

The two figures walk towards the front door of the house. One is a TEENAGER, the other MIDDLE-AGED. They exchange a glance as they approach.

UPSTAIRS

Amy ditches the lipstick, uses the compact to powder her face. It's tinted to match the color of her skin.

In the compact mirror, thin green VEINS spider underneath her eyes. She packs as much product on as possible. When she's done, the veins are barely noticeable.

She blinks, and snaps the compact shut.

INT. HOUSE - FRONT HALLWAY - DAY

Simple rustic furnishings and plain walls throughout the house. The front door is large and wooden. Next to it, a large CHEST.

A sharp RAP on the other side of the door.

AUNT JEM, early 40's, long hair in a practical updo and the sleeves of her dress pushed up to her elbows.

She carries a curved metal SICKLE. She quickly puts it in the chest with a CLANG and closes the lid.

AUNT JEM

Amy! Your cousin is here!

She adjusts her hair, pulls one side of her collar up. She opens the door:

The older figure, PHILLIP, an eternal optimist, offers a smile. He seems weary, but is pushing through it.

Next to him, a sullen teen - LEON, 16, wants nothing more than to get back in that car and turn around.

Phillip puts down his two suitcases and extends his arms for an embrace.

PHILLIP

Jemima. It's good to see you.

Aunt Jem moves behind the door a little to let them inside.

AUNT JEM

Come in. We're glad you made it.

Phillip drops his arms, brushing it off. He picks up his bags and steps inside, Leon following.

PHILLIP

It's thanks to you that we had
somewhere to make it to. Leon and I
are so grateful -

AUNT JEM

Oh, don't do that. We don't mind the company. Besides, you're family.

Phillip smiles and lets Aunt Jem take one of his bags. Aunt Jem leads them both down the hall and into the

KITCHEN

Leon stares at the plain room. Nothing on the walls, a simple wood counter top and a wood table and chairs in the center.

AUNT JEM (CONT'D)

I hope you don't mind putting in a bit of work around here. Just little things. Helping with the upkeep of the farm...

PHILLIP

Not at all, of course.

Leon shoots Phillip a look: are you serious?? Phillip: do as you're told.

Aunt Jem sets down the bags and goes about making some coffee. Phillip and Leon take a seat at the table. Phillip takes a cigar from his jacket pocket and strikes a match.

LEON

Can I have a go?

PHILLIP

Well...

AUNT JEM

Cigars are for outside. And only on special occasions.

She smiles politely. After a beat, Phillip obliges and puts the cigar away.

Aunt Jem brings two cups of coffee to the table, one for each of her guests. Leon takes a sip and winces.

AUNT JEM (CONT'D)

I hear getting out wasn't easy.

Leon looks to Phillip, who takes a moment before answering.

PHILLIP

They say the city is going the way of Chicago. Overrun by rotters. We were lucky to leave when we did.

Aunt Jem pulls up her collar again. Her dress keeps slipping down on one side.

Amy peeks around the doorway. Phillip breaks into a smile.

PHILLIP (CONT'D)

You've gotta be kidding me! Amy,
last time I saw you, your head came
up to my knee!

AMY

Hi Uncle Phillip.

She doesn't move from her spot. Phillip's smile fades as his enthusiastic welcome is not matched.

PHILLIP

Where's Charlie?

AMY

Setting up the feeders.

This gets Leon's attention.

LEON

What's he using?

Amy shrugs.

AUNT JEM

It's cow this week.

LEON

He's got good snares?

AUNT JEM

Ugh. Nasty traps. Amy nearly got
her foot stuck in one at the
neighbor's.

Amy flushes and backs up further against the wall.

LEON

That's crazy -

Phillip stops Leon with his hand. He takes a sip of the coffee and suppresses a gag.

PHILLIP

Jem, you really can't just have
feeders out there with no traps.
What's to stop them from reaching
the house?

AUNT JEM
They would never -

PHILLIP
That's what I used to think.

Aunt Jem can say nothing to that. Leon can't quite believe he went there, and neither can Phillip.

Phillip takes out a fine leather wallet and hands Leon some cash.

PHILLIP (CONT'D)
Snares. Deadfalls. Foothold traps.
Whatever you can find. Take Amy and
Charlie with you.

Leon, charged with the responsibility, is more than happy to take the lead.

LEON
Yessir.
(to Amy)
Come on, then.

Leon leaps up and strides out towards the front door. Amy gives Aunt Jem a nervous glance, and she nods back in reassurance. Amy scurries after Leon.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Leon is in bed, Charlie is walking towards his own. Leon watches him set out a trap near the door.

LEON
I guess I'll watch my step in the
morning.

Charlie glowers, gets into bed and turns out the oil lamp.

Leon rolls over. Looks outside to the window. The big full moon illuminating the fields outside.

And something else.

Leon squints.

A darkness moves at the edge of the woods. A shape. A person?

Leon sits up to get a better look.

Charlie blinks awake.

CHARLIE
What are you doing?

LEON
I saw one.

CHARLIE
Rotters don't come out here. This
isn't St. Louis.

LEON
It looked like -

CHARLIE
We have these things called animals
in the countryside. And guess what?
They live outside. Sometimes, they
move.

Charlie rolls on his side, and the conversation is over.

EXT. OUTDOOR MARKETPLACE - DAY

Small vendors and stands line either side of an unpaved street, buildings behind them. A smattering of VILLAGERS move between the stands.

Pushing past them are Leon, Amy and Charlie, who holds a loop of rope with a handful of TRAPS hanging from it.

Amy tilts her head to see into a stall of smoked meats.

Leon swings his own loop of rope with traps in one hand. With the other, he tosses a half eaten apple in the air and catches it.

LEON
What kind of apple is this?

Charlie doesn't even look at him.

CHARLIE
It's just an apple.

Leon takes another bite.

LEON
It's bitter. Don't they sell those
big honeycrisp ones here?

CHARLIE
People sell what they can grow.

Leon tosses his apple at a nearby tree and throws his arm around Charlie, who grimaces.

LEON

In the city, they have apples as big as your hand. It's like an entire meal!

Charlie pushes his arm off. Leon falters.

The trio reaches a large CHURCH: brick walls, a pointed tower with bells. Leon lets out a low whistle.

LEON (CONT'D)

Looks like a hotspot for some dancing.

AMY

That's the church.

LEON

So where do people go?

AMY

Go?

LEON

For fun. To listen to music, sneak a bit of giggle water?

CHARLIE

You should be careful were you say things like that.

LEON

Charlie, no one *cares* anymore. There are actual monsters running through the streets. What's a splash of liquor going to harm?

Charlie shakes his head. Leon smirks and discreetly flashes a silver flask at them from inside his jacket pocket.

Amy's eyes are WIDE.

CHARLIE

Flash that around and people will really know you're not from around here. We're no hooligan anarchists.

Charlie swipes the flask from his hands and pours it out on the street.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

THUNK!

A slab of meat is thrown into what looks like a bear trap. Amy takes another slab from her bucket and tosses it into another trap.

LEON

You're doing it wrong.

Leon arranges his own trap methodically, coldly. He crouches down, pries it open with a CLICKING sound. Places the meat carefully so it hides the sharp spikes.

He stands, examines his work.

LEON (CONT'D)

If you have the bait too far out,
they'll never trigger the snapping
mechanism.

Leon demonstrates, grabbing the meat from the trap easily. It doesn't close.

He then places the meat on the spikes again.

LEON (CONT'D)

But now...

He takes a large stick and wriggles it in the center. The trap SNAPS closed, breaking the stick in two.

Amy squeals in alarm.

INT. HOUSE - CHARLIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Leon faces the window. Watching the outdoors. Movement again from outside.

Leon checks behind him. Charlie is asleep. Leon gets out of bed.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Leon shrugs on his jacket, pocketing a knife. He walks down the footpath, sticking to the tall grass.

Ahead of him, the two shadows walk. One carries a sickle.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

The church looms.

A dark shape passes across the screen.

Lurking behind them, between two trees:

Leon, wide eyes. He's not sure what he's seeing but he's a hero. He needs to save his family.

He follows the shadow inside.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Leon sneaks in behind them, hides behind a pillar.

A small CROWD: villagers of all ages, gathering in stations.

At one station, they have weapons. Knives, guns.

At the next station near the wall, there are empty cages and chains.

At another station are towels and buckets of water. People rub their faces with damp towels, taking off makeup to reveal -

Faces, decayed, all the wrong colors.

Rotters.

Leon looks away a moment to gather himself. He's scared.

A figure with a sickle walks past. It's Aunt Jem. She puts down the sickle to help a girl chain herself up. Amy.

Amy's face is dead and decaying like many of them.

All along the wall are other pairs. One rotter, one human. The rotters chain themselves to the church wall while the human holds some type of weapon against them.

One of them, already rabid, pulls against their chains. A man threatens him with a shotgun.

Rotters and humans, together.

Leon turns away from the scene to catch himself. How is this possible? He grabs a gun from the pile and sneaks into the closet.

Amy struggles against her chains, and one, rotted, squeaks off. She goes to the closet.

INT. CHURCH CLOSET - CONTINUOUS

The closet has enough standing room for a couple of people. The shelves hold chains.

Amy sorts through them.

LEON

Amy.

She jumps, turns to see him watching from between the curtains. Her face decayed. She wriggles for an explanation.

AMY

What are you doing here?

LEON

You've turned.

AMY

I'm not going to hurt anyone.
That's why I'm here, to make sure.

LEON

That's why Aunt Jem is here.

AMY

You've got to leave before they
realize you're not a regular
visitor. I don't know what would
happen.

LEON

We thought we could keep my mum
from turning. Locked her in the
spare room as her skin got leathery
and weak. Fed her animal scraps. We
thought we could keep her under
control until she...

Leon's eyes are shining.

LEON (CONT'D)

Well, it's not possible. I've
learned that now.

AMY

What do you -

A GUNSHOT.

Amy drops to the floor.

Leon has shot at her from inside his pocket. He takes the gun out now, shaking. Afraid.

The noise stops from outside.

Now there's just a polite knocking. Then clawing at the door. Then MOANING and GROANING of rotters. Monsters.

The door handle wobbles, turns...

FADE OUT.

Fear of Ourselves

“Maybe the monster has our face, and we’re so obsessed with some unrecognizable monster that we’ve been blinded to the real one.”

— Jordan Peele, director of the film *Us* (2019).

In Sigmund Freud’s personality theory, the psyche is comprised of three aspects: the Ego, the Superego and the Id — the selfish, instinctual, and amoral aspect of the self. According to Freud, we all have anger and rage in the form of the Id, but we repress these desires in order to maintain social relationships and live among others. Horror, in this context, offers a catharsis for this dark shadow self.

One of the most well-known representations of this concept in fiction is Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, first published in 1886. Through drinking a serum, the harmless Dr. Jekyll transforms into the murderous Mr. Hyde, unleashing the most heinous parts of his personality. “Man is not truly one, but truly two,” claims Dr. Jekyll in a letter explaining why he chose to separate the two sides of himself. “The unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.”

The myth of this extraneous evil manifested in real life just two years after the publication of Stevenson’s novella. Jack the Ripper, one of the most notorious serial murderers in history, found victims around the London area. However, sensationalized reports of his

killings spread worldwide, with American publications suggesting that the killer was at large in New York City.

Pulp magazines, which emphasized the gory details of these crimes, shocked audiences again in the mid-1890s with the horrifying details of H.H. Holmes' Chicago 'murder mansion,' in which he claimed to have killed up to 200 people. While only nine of these murders were confirmed, the public was fascinated by the transgressions made by a killer who had fully embraced Freud's Id, and who claimed that horns were growing from his skull.

The murderer continued to make a name for itself as a monster throughout the 20th century. Albert Fish, an American serial killer and cannibal, was known by monstrous names such as the Werewolf of Wysteria, the Brooklyn Vampire, and the Grey Man. Reports of depraved killers such as Ed Gein, who made masks and lamp shades from the skin of his victims, inspired fictional counterparts in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Psycho* (1960) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). The 1970s saw the serial killer take on a more prominent role in American culture, where a wave of paranoia warned that behind friendly neighborly charm was the possibility of a Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez. Not unlike Frankenstein's monster, Ramirez was apprehended after an angry mob recognized him and chased him through the streets until authorities arrived.

This monster evolved in the 21st century, and was frequently used to critique the societies from which they came. John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) challenged the idea of suburban life as a symbol of middle class success. *American Psycho* (2000) depicts how Patrick Bateman, a psychopathic killer, is able to thrive on Wall Street.

The television show *Dexter*, as Scott Poole points out, “critiques white, middle-class dreams while affirming them.” *Dexter* asks the audience to identify with the killer in uncomfortable ways. The audience simultaneously experiences a desire for vigilante justice and a repulsion from Dexter’s dark drives, forcing us to look at our own attitudes towards his actions.

In Jordan Peele’s 2019 *Us*, the protagonist Adelaide struggles to recover after an encounter with her shadow self, a doppelganger named Red who lives below ground. We sympathise with Adelaide and want to see her beat Red, and we cheer as she eventually manages to kill her... that is until it is revealed that Red is the real Adelaide, and we have been cheering for the doppelganger version of the protagonist all along. Peele says we’re so focused on the other that we don’t realize that this is ourselves. It’s not just the individual he’s critiquing, he’s asking the country collectively to take a look at themselves, to sit with the monstrosities brewing in the darkness of our own minds.

Radio Silence

written by

Lauren DeLorenzo

Address
Phone
E-mail

FADE IN:

INT. COLLEGE STAIRWELL - DAY

JENNA, 19, a bubbly optimist bursting with professional enthusiasm, jogs up the stairwell. She's holding a to-go container with three cups of coffee.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
A local man has died after a hit-
and-run incident on Lorry Avenue.

Jenna, at the top of the stairwell, pushes through the door and into a

HALLWAY

Where she strides quickly towards a

RADIO STATION.

The red "ON AIR" sign blinks at her as she passes and walks through another door.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The twenty-six-year-old
schoolteacher was found this
morning by authorities.

INT. RADIO STATION STUDIO - DAY

A large desk space and a monitor with a colorful "WBLZ" logo spinning slowly.

On one side of the desk: box-y radio equipment, a sound board.

DEVIN, monitors levels on a computer screen. Devin is 20, wearing a slouch beanie and big headphones. Getting any sort of reaction from her is a minor miracle.

On the other side of the desk: two chairs and two mics.

The radio announcer, MILES, 20, sits at the desk with over-the-ear headphones, speaking into a mic. A laptop open in front of him.

The door to the station has a small window in it. Jenna peeks in.

RADIO ANNOUNCER/MILES
 And finally, the International
 Space Station has announced that
 the first mouse has been born
 outside of Earth's orbit...

Miles glances up at Jenna, who holds up the coffee.

MILES (CONT'D)
 ...begging the question, in space,
 can anyone hear you squeak?

Miles grins. Jenna raises her eyebrows, unimpressed.

MILES (CONT'D)
 That's it for the morning update.
 We'll be back with Jenna's Advice
 corner after this.

Devin moves a slider on the board to transition into a song.

DEVIN
 We're clear.

Jenna opens the door with her hip.

JENNA
 Hello, hello! Life saver here!
 (acting out their
 reactions)
 'Jenna, you're so wonderful.' 'I
 know.'

She hands a coffee to Devin and one to Miles.

DEVIN
 Caffeine is not an excuse for being
 late.
 (she peers inside the
 takeout cup)
 And I don't drink espresso.

JENNA
 Oh, it's non-fat, don't worry.

DEVIN
 That's not the problem.

MILES
 Thanks, Jen.

Jenna takes the seat next to Miles, wincing. She gently
 stretches out her neck. Pops on her headphones.

MILES (CONT'D)
You alright?

JENNA
Slept funny.

DEVIN
(to Jenna)
Your headphones aren't plugged in.

JENNA
(to Miles)
You finished that kickback
playlist, right?

Devin rolls her eyes. Ignored again.

MILES
Yeah, yeah, it's done.

DEVIN
One minute 'til we're on.

JENNA
(adjusting her mic)
Good. I sent Devin some of my
suggestions too. It's finals week,
people are stressed, they don't
want to think about things. We're a
distraction. I want them sneaking
in earbuds during class to listen.

MILES
Sure -

JENNA
Calls are being vetted through
studio B today?

MILES
Yeah, they'll put them through to
us.

Devin glances at Jenna's unplugged headphone jack. She won't say it twice.

DEVIN
In five...

Devin holds up five fingers, counting them down on each finger silently. Miles and Jenna straighten up, stretch on the smiles of presenters. The music dies down.

Devin points at them. Go.

MILES

Welcome back to W-B-L-Z, I'm Miles and I'm here with Jenna who has **all** the answers to your problems. How are you doing, Jenna?

Jenna realizes halfway through Miles' dialogue that her headphones are unplugged. She plugs in the jack. Wonky smile.

JENNA

Doing great, Miles. It's coming up to finals, the holidays are around the corner. People need advice on gift-giving, on study tips, on whether it's humanly possible to get an 'A' in Professor Hannock's econ class... and it's all here. Nineteen years of wisdom, baby.

Devin rolls her eyes, presses a button on a landline telephone and it lights up green. On Miles' laptop, a message: "Caller 1 ready."

MILES

Alright, we're gonna jump to our first caller. Eva, you there?

EVA (V.O.)

Hi Jenna, so my roommate keeps eating all my snacks in the night. I know it's her, but I don't want to start an argument. What should I say to her?

JENNA

(stretching her neck)

Well Eva, sometimes, people don't want to admit to the things they've done.

(a pause)

Especially if they're self-conscious about it. Hide your snacks in your room. When she's ready, she'll talk to you about it.

MILES

We have another caller. Allen, you're having some trouble getting a girl to notice you?

A radio show's worst nightmare: dead air.

It lasts a lifetime.

ALLEN
This is childish.

JENNA
We have other callers.

ALLEN
We have other callers.

JENNA
Our listeners didn't tune in for a
stupid prank.

ALLEN
Our listeners didn't tune in for a
stupid prank.

MILES
(taking over)
Allen, I think you should hang up.

From now on, Jenna and Allen speak perfectly in sync.

JENNA
(whispers, to Devin)
Cut him off.

ALLEN (V.O.)
(whispers)
Cut him off.

Mildly panicked, Devin pulls some cords from their sockets.
Anything to save this train-wreck of a segment.

JENNA (CONT'D)
(raising her voice)
Why are you copying me and
not Miles?

ALLEN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Why are you copying me and
not Miles?

Miles moves his mic away and leans over to Devin.

MILES
They're speaking at exactly the
same time. How are they doing that?

JENNA
(snapping at Miles)
I'm not doing anything!

ALLEN (V.O.)
I'm not doing anything!

The three of them pause, lost for an explanation. After a
moment:

DEVIN
Is this a stunt? One last laugh
before you graduate?
Did you plan this?

Something has taken hold.

Miles backs off. Terrified.

Allen's voice, now stronger, deeper, calmer. He is in control. This is not the same Allen we heard at the start of the call.

ALLEN (V.O.)
Hello, Jenna.

Jenna, shaking, trapped. Then, a strangled response:

JENNA
...hello, Jenna.

Miles, horrified, taking this in.

ALLEN (V.O.)
Do you remember me?

JENNA
Do you... remember me?

ALLEN (V.O.)
I remember you.

JENNA
I remember... you.

Miles gets up, runs over to Devin's place at the board. Starts turning switches.

ALLEN (V.O.)
You thought you got away. But I saw you.

JENNA
You thought you got away. But I saw you.

ALLEN
You weren't paying any attention.
You were on the phone.

JENNA
You weren't paying any attention.
You were on the phone.

Jenna stifles a gasp. She knows who this is now.

If she could sob, she would.

Miles kicks the controls, runs his hands through his hair.

MILES

How is he still patched through?

ALLEN (V.O.)

Talk talk talk talk talk.

JENNA

Talk talk talk talk talk.

ALLEN (V.O.)

You didn't hear me scream.

Miles looks up. What??

JENNA

You didn't hear me scream.

ALLEN (V.O.)

You didn't hear me hit the hood.

JENNA

You didn't hear me... hit the hood.

ALLEN

You didn't even stop.

JENNA

You didn't even...

INT. JENNA'S CAR - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

A country road. The car is still running.

Jenna in the driver's seat, one hand frozen around her mobile phone. The other bent around her neck, as if braced from whiplash. Wide eyes, deep breaths.

She glances in the rear view mirror. On the road behind her, a lump. A person. Not moving.

Jenna, processing for a moment. Thinking.

She swallows. Drives away.

BACK TO SCENE

Jenna, haunted, a tear falling, but still frozen in place. Still trapped by whatever is reaching her through the airwaves.

JENNA

...stop.

ALLEN (V.O.)

I think you'll hear me now.

The green light on the telephone goes out. Miles watches the board.

MILES

He's off air. He's gone.

Jenna, unable to speak. Shallow gasping from her throat. She opens and closes her mouth, but nothing comes out. Not anymore.

FADE OUT.

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