

## The Real Benoli

To my shame I turned away in the movie theater. I've never liked blood. Schlocky horror movies make me wince, so I don't feel bad about having the same reaction to the most anticipated and controversial documentary of the year, *Midnight in Atlanta*.

The film, shot guerilla-style, provided an intimate interview with Michael Vollington. Over the last six months, the nation had watched the domestic terrorist strike at cities throughout the South, predominantly in neighborhoods comprised of lower-middle class communities. During the opening credits, Vollington's voiceover framed his crimes as grand, artistically driven social experiments: How long could he commit a spree of increasingly heinous acts against minorities before the public cared? The answer: Approximately four-and-a-half years, only coming to light when he started explicitly sharing his exploits online. The film suggests that if he hadn't begun pulling increasingly absurd stunts, he'd be at it still.

*M.i.A.* would have been a success regardless, as the nation had been fascinated with Vollington for the past six months, but the movie wouldn't have generated half as much buzz if studios and lawyers and government officials weren't threatening to pull it before it got a wide release. Online forums proposed that the documentary was commissioned and orchestrated by Vollington himself and should be avoided by the general public. There was enough textual evidence within the film to support this argument, in my humble opinion.

Marnie and I were fortunate enough to receive an invitation to the premiere. We talked the matter over ad nauseum and eventually agreed that it was important viewing despite the controversy. It was the only choice, really. This was American history unfolding before our very eyes, a potentially significant turning point. We felt it was our duty to be aware of the horrors

of the world, not to mention that our respective professions required we stay up to date on important artistic achievements.

The documentary showed the incidents in all their brutality, spliced together with footage from security cameras and cell phones. The climax of the movie occurred when, in Vollington's own words, he shed his subtlety and drove a truck through the plate glass window of a Walmart, sending 6 year old Eleanor Birmingham's body to fly and break against the cereal section.

That's when I turned away, watching the blood leak out her little ear. I turned into the headrest and wept, breathing in the scent of popcorn and sweat. My hand clenched the Heineken I'd bought at the snack stand and I thought, what, is this all for my entertainment?

I would have turned back regardless, but when Marnie squeezed my hand I had no choice. She expected a show of strength from me, and for a moment I was irritated at her assumption that I needed comfort. I had to look. For her.

And so I turned back. Watched Vollington spew his rhetoric about how the system was the problem, not him. His eyes were big and dark and the dirty roots of his white-boy dreadlocks' showed the remnants of pink dye.

His arguments were manifold and mad, contradictory, lacking in specificity. Depending on which soundbite each crime was overlaid with, his actions were a protest against big oil, the farming industry, political apathy, billionaires, etc. The system must be broken, and if innocents had to die to spark a change, well then let him be history's villain. If they happened to be POC, it helped his argument (his words, obviously). He said he didn't vote, but if he had to, he'd vote for the good guy.

A sick part of me almost followed Vollington's logic. Flashbacks struck me as I sat there in the dark. Cringes I'd induced from friends after innocuous shit talking. In my more frustrated moments, perhaps after one too many drinks, I'd propose something equally offensive to get a rise of out of my peers. Just to get the conversation started. We all see something's wrong, at least my circle does, and we don't know what to do about it. Increasingly, I find it difficult to even identify what the problem is, or what exactly makes me walk through the streets with my hands bunched up in fists. But whatever it is that's going on in this world, it's wrong, and people like myself – intelligent people, empathetic people, those of us with means and money – need to make it better. Instead, people shut up. Tune out. Approach the world with willfully ignorant optimism. I can't stand it.

I maintain that it's important to have such conversations. Even if they're prompted through shocking measures. Making audacious statements is often the only way I gain a voice in this world. I would like to be a part of the broader conversation. Of course I never mean to cross a line, and if I do, it's ironic. It's coming from a well-intentioned place, and those who know me well understand this.

Still, the film unsettled me. I was silent after the credits rolled. I tried to reflect on the experience, and how I could use it to better myself. I tried to make it mean something. But all I felt was anger and it had no place to go.

I stood beneath the marque, smoking a cigarette and trying to tune out my fellow patrons' endless chatter. I needed a minute, just for myself, to let my fury pass. What could I do to help? This was an important cultural moment. These marginalized communities, including my friends – my family, Goddamit! – I didn't want them to pass me on the street and feel

unsafe. I wanted everyone I met to be comfortable with me. That was what it meant to be a good person. I had to internalize that. I just needed a moment. It's not so much to ask.

So when Marnie started talking, I wasn't necessarily receptive to it.

"It's nothing new," she said. I couldn't believe her, and showed admirable restraint when I responded simply,

"Doesn't make it right."

"No, but I don't know why White America has latched onto this particular sociopath rather than any of the others. That's the real story. What is it that makes *this* time any different? Millions of people go through stuff like this every day, but suddenly we're all so very concerned," she said, tapping at her phone. She was probably composing a Tweet, and her speech was to be the rough draft of a sentiment she would whittle down until it was pithy enough to meet the character count.

Marnie's point wasn't necessarily what I took issue with. I happened to agree with her. Things had been breaking since long before the two of us were born, before our parents, or our parents' parents, or our parent's parents' parents before that. We subscribed to the same YouTube channels, mostly commentary videos deconstructing the failings of late-stage capitalism. We shared the same logins to various online publications, we hung around a likeminded crowd. We were on the same side.

No, what bothered me was the way she said it. As if I had less of a say than her. True, she was mixed race, but the way the Punnett Square had played out left her with a melanin deficit, so much so that when we went to the beach she was more concerned about the application of sunscreen than I was. I myself am white. I acknowledge it, and have even written

a number of pieces dissecting exactly what that means on both a micro and macro scale. One of them had trended for almost twenty hours after publication. Yes, I am white, and Marnie is half-black, and these are facts, and that is all well and good.

But.

Marnie came from money. Significant money. Child-of-sitcom-stars money. Not to take away from the accomplishments she achieved in spite of societal opposition. Nor to make the conversation about myself. But, as an aside, *I* did not come from money. I grew up sharing a room with my single mother, so.

And also, not that it *really* matters, but it bears noting that Marnie presented as white. Whiter than I did, with my thick black locks and Mediterranean skin which, back in undergrad, had earned me the title of “Blackist White Guy” among the black frat, whose parties I frequented bimonthly.

Yet she was the one who acted like she’d experienced deep seeded hardships since birth, and *she* was calloused to the senseless brutalization of children. On the big screen, no less. When she had grown up in a small town in the Berkshires, surrounded by her loving family. And I had grown up in a city, practically raising myself. So.

So.

So yes. I suppose these thoughts were lurking in the back of my mind when she made her stupid comments. And maybe if she’d left me alone for a minute, just by myself, to work through my own thoughts and process them in a healthy manner, I wouldn’t have been so frustrated. I hadn’t determined exactly what I wanted to say, or more importantly, what I wanted to do. I wish she respected me enough to recognize that.

But she did what she did, and I did what I did, which was to act in a manner that, looking back, was probably not the most mature manifestation of my rage. Keeping quiet for the cab ride home. Rolling my eyes and looking at my phone as if I had a text when I didn't. Walking up the stairs to our apartment a few paces ahead of her.

My behavior did not escape her notice. She asked me repeatedly if she'd done something wrong. I assured her, no, nothing, because to be fair she hadn't. Outside of her put upon world-weariness, which was a trait I had begrudgingly learned to live with. And so I shrugged when she asked what the problem was, and in turn she shrugged when I asked *her* what the problem was hours later as she sat pouting on the couch. I took a long shower and tried to think about nothing as soap slipped off me.

We settled down to sleep. I turned away from her.

"It was disturbing. To see it, rather than hear about it. I get it," she said.

In that moment, I loved her more than I ever had before. Wanted to make love to her. For a moment. To connect. With her. With anyone. To forget about everything and feel loved and accepted and respected. Forget about our differences, either societally or personally imposed, and be together.

Yet the condescension creeping behind her words hit me just as I was rolling over. I didn't need her to tell me she understood how I felt. How could she?

And so I turned away once more. Shuffled my body about like I was just trying to get comfortable. Pretended to sleep. She spooned me from behind, faux-playfully, wrapping her legs around me. This was a recurrent joke of ours. She was nearly half my height, and we often quipped that she was much too small for me. Normally this was something whispered in jest,

and I would fall asleep cloaked in her warmth. But I didn't want her comfort that night. Or rather, I felt that if anything *she* should want *my* comfort. I shrugged her off.

"I think I'll get some writing done," I said. She hugged a pillow tight against her chest as if I were so easily replaceable.

I kept the lights off. Her paintings hung on the walls. I'd never understood them. My mind was built to break things down. Everything should stand for something, went my thinking. An object or emotion depicted in art should have a parallel in the knowable world. My essays and criticisms argued as much, and I'd been affirmed in my worldview with a steady stream of publications for the last five years. In contrast, Marnie's paintings were of a movement dubbed post-neo-surrealism. This term meant absolutely nothing, and the merit of Marnie's paintings were similarly obscure. But the cultured world at large agreed that she possessed real talent, and so at her openings I basked in the acclaim afforded to me as the fiancée of a well-respected artist. She reaped the same rewards at the occasional academic conference she deigned to attend.

I fixed myself a nightcap, downed it, fixed myself another. Sat down at my laptop. Lights off, bluescreen reflected on my face. The apartment pressed in on me.

The writing was slow going. I spent an hour or so getting two paragraphs in, rereading my work, and deleting it. What I felt had merit. My feelings were the same as the rest of the nation's, and I knew that I could write something truly significant if I could only synthesis my emotions into a comprehensive indictment of the current socio-political climate. So I would write two paragraphs and watch my emotions pour onto the page in well-defined reflections. Just as I was touching something true, I would make the mistake of skimming over my work

thus far. And something about it read as...defensive. Ignorant. Out of touch. I found myself reviewing the documentary as a film – which, as an aside, it is truly a marvel – rather than touching on the social climate that had led us here. The words lacked propulsion.

By now I desperately desired Marnie. She was always good at comforting me, supporting me, reminding me of why I write and how. I regretted my childishness. I wanted to wake up in her arms, and determined to set things right.

I peeked into the bedroom to find her sleeping, pillow snug against her breast. I swallowed my disappointment, then looked at things from a practical standpoint. There were alternatives. Alternatives that were perhaps superior to Marnie herself.

Some things are not meant to be shared with others. There were parts of myself I kept from Marnie – the times I don't always wash my hands after pissing, the flask I carry in my pocket, the way I hold a burp in my mouth and savor its taste. I'm sure Marnie held her own secret practices, behaviors that would disappoint me. We withheld these truths from one another not as a deception, but rather as a means of protecting the other from ourselves. It's a fundamental aspect of the human condition, and I feel no shame in nurturing my own set of vices. One among them went by the name of Real\_Benoli.

My first exposure to pornography occurred when I was fourteen and stumbled across the Wikipedia entry on "Cunnilingus," clicking on a hyperlink innocently buried in an unrelated entry. It was an honest accident, albeit a happy one. At that point, as a child who shared a desktop with his mother, I was terrified to search up anything that could be construed as outright scandalous. But this discovery happened honestly, nothing to hide. My mind raced. This was a system to be easily exploited.



Over the ensuing months I began to search the internet strategically. Pursued reputable fetishes, co-signed by the cleanest sources of the early internet. If I were ever to be caught, I could point to a research paper gone wrong. For school, of course. This was all to better my future.

It never came to that. My mother either never checked her search history or else she didn't feel comfortable confronting her son about his burgeoning sexuality. I find the latter possibility more believable. My mother and I were not in the habit of speaking on matters of substance, or for that matter, anything at all.

Her indifference emboldened me. I began openly utilizing search engines, employing increasingly salacious synonyms.

*Breasts.*

*Boobs.*

*Boobiez.*

*Sexy Ladies.*

*Porn.*

I do not regret my adolescent infatuation with pornography. It's a normal if not unspoken rite of passage. The freedom I experienced during my earliest explorations is a sensation I have yet to encounter in my adult life. I could go from an unremarkable child to a bona fide lothario with a few simple keystrokes. I found my each and every fantasy pre-recorded and quite literally begging to be consumed.

Yet my forays into pornography devolved from excitement to boredom in a dishearteningly short amount of time. What at first seemed novel quickly grew stale, and I

trudged through the internet day after day more out of a sense of duty than of anything else, the same way I felt about brushing my teeth. By the time I was fifteen, the exaggerated sighs and screams became like so much other white noise.

That is, until I first encountered Real\_Benoli. Her thumbnail was but one among many splattered on the homepage, algorithmically slated to appeal to me for today only to be forgotten about tomorrow. I clicked on it without a thought. It played in the corner of my screen as I worked on an English assignment that asked us to investigate the role of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*.

I tried to focus on my homework but...what's this? No whimpers, no moans? Something new was happening. I full-screened the video, more out of a sense of curiosity than arousal, and learned that I was not in Kansas anymore. The quality was grainy, no more impressive than the camera on my flip phone, a stark departure from the professionally lit sets and soundstages I was accustomed to. Nor was there any story – no undersexed stepmom, no dubiously ordered pizza.

Instead, the video depicted a dewy eyed woman who smiled coyly as the camera moved toward her face before she turned away with a giggle and a hair flip. She smirked when the man behind the camera cracked a joke and then, to my amazement, she slugged him on the arm. As if they'd know each other for years, had been together for years, and this was but one day out of many in a safe and prosperous relationship.

That afternoon was my first taste of intimacy. The way the bodies moved against each other, the quiet contentment on her face. She hardly registered the camera at all, and when she did it was to laugh about how embarrassing her partner was, or how she didn't like the way

she looked. What I watched was not pornographic. It was real. It was love. The camera was negligible.

I tracked down all her videos, totaling six. Even her titles were more artful than that of her competition. *coffeeinbed0078* was my personal favorite, an extended sequence of cuddling and flirtation as a TV played an anime show in the background – (they'd forgotten to turn it off!) – concluding with a tasteful act of fellatio. I watched the video so many times I could recite it by heart, and to this day believe it to be her finest work.

Since that fateful discovery I've stumbled across any number of copycats and camgirls, big budget porn masquerading as amateur sex tapes. The deception is clear to me, as an experienced observer.

Real\_Benoli is necessary. I've never stopped watching her. I watch only her. It is a harmless practice, affecting only me. I know her actions well and love them all. In times of strife she is my primary source of companionship. After watching *Midnight in Atlanta*, I needed a reminder that some things in this life remain constant. Again, I have nothing to be ashamed of.

Then why was I made to feel like a child when Marnie burst into the room, startling me? Frankly, I don't believe her retroactive excuse, that she was getting up to pee. She must have been listening through the wall, planning her moment of attack. She came upon me in the throes of my passion, naked from the waist down and hunched over the light of my laptop like a caveman seeking warmth at a fire.

She paused in the doorway, laughed maliciously, and went into the bathroom. When she returned she wrinkled her nose and wordlessly opened a window. By then, at least, I'd had the chance to pull my pants up, but still she said something like,

“You do know my grandmother gave me that couch, right?” before padding into the bedroom.

My fury knew no bounds. She felt she could posture at moral superiority by mere virtue of encroaching on *my* space? What kind of logic was that? First she had deprived me of the time to process my trauma, and now when I sought comfort, she took that from me too. All night I’d been mistreated. I wanted her to know it. I wanted someone to know, in very plain terms, that I was upset. All the I space that I had once been afforded was being chipped away at it. I was being punished for perfectly natural emotions and urges. I wasn’t going to stand for it.

I followed her. She was curled up in bed, her back towards me. Petty. I could play her game.

We lay in the dark.

“I’m going to sleep,” I said after about ten minutes. She didn’t respond, and even gave a faulty little snore.

“We can talk about it in the morning, but right now I’m tired,” I said again.

“If you want to,” she responded.

“I suppose you’re self-conscious. You wonder why I didn’t want to be with you tonight.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It’s not all about you, you know.”

“My God.”

“Sometimes it’s about me. And that’s okay. For it to be about me sometimes.”

“Go to sleep,” she said.

“Okay. Long as you’re not jealous of her.”

This got a rise. Finally. She'd taken an interest. I was content.

"Her? Do you know this woman?"

"Let's sleep."

"No, I want to know. Were you chatting with her? Are you on one of those apps?"

Somehow she'd gained the upper hand. My instincts told me to stay silent. Let her stew. But that would make me the bad guy – if I'd been chatting with a woman online, that might constitute as cheating, or at least some moral cousin to it.

With a smile, I realized I still had the power here. I could simply tell her the truth, or at least, as much of it as she needed to know. Marnie would never understand the extent of my relationship with Real\_Benoli. She would think it just another video. Should I confess to this minor sin, she would write it off as an uncomfortable but necessary aspect to man's condition. By tomorrow we'd be back to normal.

So I told her that it was simple pornography. To spite her, just a bit, just to prove that I had nothing to hide, I told her the name of the video. Exhausted but satisfied, I fell asleep.

I woke up to the smell of coffee. Eggs and bacon, burnt and crispy. Marnie was sitting at the table reading her phone, and when I kissed her on the forehead she smiled. She'd cooked for me. All was right.

"I looked her up," she said.

"Pardon?"

"I looked her up. This morning. It was silly, but I was curious."

"Okay," I said. I chewed my eggs.

“I wouldn’t watch that video again,” Marnie said. I hid my smile by chewing my eggs. Jealousy, plain and simple. She expected a certain level of decorum from me, depended upon it, and couldn’t control her emotions despite her best intentions. I loved her very much, in that moment, as her values couldn’t meet her actions. Maybe I would fuck her after this. On her grandmother’s couch.

“I thought you supported sex workers,” I said.

“Don’t be an ass. I googled her. Her face was familiar. That’s that girl from that documentary, a few years back. *Home Videos Inc.*, you remember that one? She’s the one who took her life halfway through the filming. The story of her boyfriend leaking it? Saying he would only sell it to some high end clients, and then she goes back home and everyone’s seen?”

I sipped my coffee. Dregs got caught in my teeth.

“I didn’t see that one,” I said.

Marnie got dressed and didn’t say much else. Kissed me quick and left.

I sat at the table and tried to write but nothing came. The energy of last night was gone, and in its place was a new frustration that I could have done something, could have responded to something in a meaningful way, if something else hadn’t come up first. I felt completely impotent.

There was always another problem. The particular issue with *this* problem was that I could identify it precisely. I understood that I had unknowingly participated in sick, gross, and possibly even criminal behavior. It wasn’t an ethical conundrum. Viewing videos for a sexual purpose when their subjects’ had committed suicide was wrong, and the solution was the stop.

The question I found myself presented with, in the sunlit apartment with Marnie's paintings hanging on the walls, was: Did I want to? Or rather, did I have to?

Real\_Benoli had been an aid to me for so very, very long. At the end of a hard day, I knew that she would never pass judgement upon me, that she would be there for me the same way she always had.

The *right* thing to do was to stop watching her videos. That was obvious.

But.

Would I really hurt anyone by keeping on just the same as always? Her films were nearly two decades old, practically dinosaur bones in internet terms. And were I to stop, were I to simply remove myself from her audience, would anything *really* change? Was there even a problem, really?

I determined I wouldn't make a decision until after watching the documentary Marnie had mentioned. It held a 87% on Rotten Tomatoes, and rogerebert.com had listed it as one of the most important films of its year. I don't know how it had escaped my notice. I pride myself on being caught up in the times.

The documentary opened well enough. There was definitely talent behind the camera, in its stylistic decision to film the girls' interviews in that familiar, grainy resolution.

But then *she* was speaking on the screen, and the name underneath said not Real\_Benoli but something else entirely, and new words were coming out of her mouth. She talked about her boyfriend at the time, and why they'd shot the videos, and how she'd needed the money, and how much pressure he'd put on her, and the way her friends now looked at her, and the way her brother looked at her, and the way her mother looked at her, and the way

she cried, and the way she'd stopped eating right, and the cuts on her arm, and the therapy she's going to, and the sick feeling that just won't seem to go away, and –

And I didn't want to watch any more, so I turned the TV off.