

I, Monster

In all the years my mom sat by my bedside, reading books I was much too old for—short, pleasant stories about dogs and kittens—she never once mentioned my father, even on accident. Early on, when I asked about him, she'd only say, "That's behind us now. Let's look to the future." I didn't understand then what that meant, and even now I don't understand how she was able to move on from nearly ten years of trauma. I can't seem to move on from any of it.

I saw the pictures online. I've got a monster's cold, blue blood pulsing through my veins.

It's hard to know who is and who isn't a monster until he slows his Chrysler LeBaron alongside you on your walk home from school, but I'm always on the lookout. There aren't many suspects at school. Most are ordinary teenagers: emotional, insecure messes, but nothing that cries out, "future kidnapper, rapist and murderer." Some of them know my story and therefore want nothing to do with me, some know my story and want to play the hero, learn all the gory details and tell me that none of it matters (which is of course bullshit), and then there are those whose instincts I admire the most—the ones who don't know my story at all but who stay away from me just because I'm me: a fucked up girl with ghostly skin, hand-me-down clothing and a "remarkably unpleasant disposition," as Mr. Erickson said to me one day after physics class when he was trying to get through to me for my "own good."

Mr. Erickson is an asshole, but he isn't a monster. He doesn't fit the profile.

If I had to guess, if I had to pick the one guy in school who might be a monster, it would be Jeff Jeffries from physics class, where he sits for the entire fifty minute period saying nothing and peering at Mr. Erickson as if he's fantasizing about torturing him. Also, his first and last names are variations of each other, and I never trust anyone with similar first and last names, or worse—identical names. Humbert Humbert is not a role model, even though all the perverts

around me have read the pertinent pages over and over, and in U.S. history I learned about Sirhan Sirhan, a non-fiction asshole. But I could never trust someone named Mike Michaels or John Johnson or Larry Lawrence or Will Williams. I won't even listen to the music of Phillip Phillips.

My last name is my mom's last name now. It used to be Samuels.

Jeff Jeffries has said one word to me all year, which is one more than I've said to him. The word was fuck.

The reason he said fuck to me wasn't because he was calling me a fuck or saying he'd like to fuck me. Mr. Erickson (whose first name is not Eric) had just handed us back our midterm exams, and while I was trying decipher why he'd taken two points off my answer about a car decelerating from fifty to twenty kilometers per hour, I noticed Jeff Jeffries studying his exam with more angst than usual, which was quite an accomplishment. I turned to look at him, and he turned to me, his face almost hidden behind his crazy long hair, and he said, "Fuck." I found this funny, so I smiled, but he didn't smile back. He almost never does, because his smile is lopsided; he was mauled by a pit bull a few years ago, and now his left cheek—which looks like a roadmap even after countless surgeries—can't move the way his right cheek can, hence the long hair.

I think if Jeff Jeffries had a different name like Jeff Meyers or Jeff Parsons or something, I could probably engage in a conversation with him that lasted longer than one word. It would probably happen gradually and build from "fuck" to something like "holy fuck" to "what the fuck?" to "fuck, this class is boring," and before long we'd be conversing in something close to legitimate sentences.

I've overheard some of the biggest losers in our school talking about going online to see the photos of Jeff Jeffries from when the *Tribune* did a piece on him about his accident and how his injuries affected him. These are the likely same jagoffs who've read in intimate detail my story. They probably get off on it, the sick fucks.

I'm the same age now as my mom was when she was taken away. The same age she was when my father locked her in the basement of his rundown ranch, the one set back from the road just enough to remain hidden from prying eyes. My mom's thirty-eight now. It took him three years to impregnate her, and from what I read online, he tried every night except during my mom's period. That's 280 times a year. My mom had sex 840 times by the time she turned twenty-one. My mom was *raped* 840 times before I was born, and I don't want to think about how many times after.

I used to tell my mom that I missed my father, only I didn't call him father back then; I called him Daddy. Daddy was kind to me. He would play dolls with me, and he'd let me win at Candyland, and sometimes we'd go into Mom's room—which I've learned since was actually something called a cage—and we'd play the game together. Even now, I really miss him sometimes, but I've learned not to tell my mom because I'm sick of talking with psychologists. What they don't seem to get is that monsters can be kind when they want to be, and my father used to treat me to ice cream and let me watch *Beauty and the Beast*, and I was allowed out in the yard to play, but I was never, ever to set foot beyond the trees where I could be seen from the road. "The Beast will find you and eat you," he warned. "Not the Beast from the movie who's really a nice man inside, but a horrible beast who eats little girls for breakfast and leaves their bones to remind other girls to beware."

I believed Daddy. He showed me the bones.

Even though I loved my father, when they came and took my mom and me away when I was six, I could sense that we were being rescued, and I remember feeling safer when it was just the two of us. She no longer flinched every time a door opened. She was able to enter and exit her room freely instead of having to ask, and her room had walls instead of bars. She no longer told me to run up to my room the way she did when my father came home from work, when I'd caress my Pooh bear in my bed for thirty minutes and hum loudly to block out the sounds from below before joining them for dinner.

On a gloomy Tuesday afternoon after an endless day at school, I begin to walk home a half a block behind Jeff Jeffries. I usually walk home from school rather than take the bus where eyes tend to fixate onto the freak girl sitting alone in the front seat. At least on the roadway I look like any other 17 year-old girl who could use a new wardrobe. No one stops to stare. Jeff Jeffries often takes the same route I do, though we've never walked together and we've never said a word to each other about it.

Thin tree branches like cracks along a windshield stretch out against a dirty sky, my mind nowhere except my kitchen where Ramen Noodles await my attention, when a car jolts me out of my meditation and whizzes past me at a crazy speed before stopping abruptly alongside Jeff Jeffries.

When I notice a car, I notice everything about it, a skill my Mom taught me at a young age. This one is a blue Chevy Blazer, license plate 189-NE12. I hear a man's voice saying something through the passenger window, and Jeff Jeffries stops and says something back to him. When I see another guy in the car's back seat, I panic and yell, "Hey! Hey, it's me from physics class," careful not to say either of our names out loud. My mom taught me that, too.

And as Jeff Jeffries turns to glance at me from inside his hooded sweatshirt, the Blazer takes off, burning rubber along the way. He stays planted in place along the side of the road, his hands stuffed inside his jeans pockets, until I catch up to him.

“You okay?” I say.

“Huh?”

“The man who just spoke to you? What did he say?”

“Why the fuck should you care what he...?” He stops, and then, with recognition, adds, “Oh. Right. No, that’s not what was happening.”

“Oh. Okay, good. Slowing cars freak me out.”

His hair covers his face, but I see his lips move and say, “Shelby, right?”

“Right. You’re Jeff Jeffries.”

He nods.

“I hate physics,” I blurt out, recognizing that we’ve just added exponentially to our past conversation.

The right side of his mouth curls ever so slightly into a half-formed smile. “Yeah, well, I’m not exactly acing the class. Erickson is a douche.”

“He says I have an unpleasant disposition.”

He smiles bigger now, so that his left side looks like it’s trying to catch up to his right side. “He told me I needed to lose the chip on my shoulder.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him to put his face inside a pit bull and then we’d talk. What did *you* say to him?”

Now I wish I’d told Mr. Erickson to save the advice until his mother’s been raped 840 times by his father. “Nothing,” I say. “I just wanted to get the hell out of there.”

We begin walking home, and I wonder if Jeff Jeffries isn't a monster at all, but just a kid who wants to be left alone and remain insulated from the Mr. Ericksons of the world. Still, when he asks me if I'd like to go to his house, I say no thank you. I don't know who this boy is, and he still kind of scares me. He fits the profile. So after a while, we diverge, Jeff Jeffries veering left into his neighborhood, me veering right, and when I get home, I revel in my sodium fix of Ramen noodles and watch two episodes of *How I Met Your Mother* before a shrill beeping noise blares from my cell phone. It's an alert from my school district about a child abduction.

And then I remember the car.

"Oh fuck!" Please, please, please, please, please, don't let it be the blue Chevy. Please don't let it be...

I check the announcement, and my insides sink as I read the description of a teenage boy and a blue SUV, and it isn't five seconds later that my phone rings, my frantic mom on the other end. I tell her that I'm okay.

"Then why are you crying?"

Am I crying? "Mom. I saw the car."

"You what?"

"I saw the car. It slowed down by a boy from school and then took off."

"And you called the police, right?" I hear her taking a breath. "Right?"

I hadn't. I hadn't even thought about it. All I'd had on my mind was Jeff Jeffries and his potential status as a non-monster and food and relaxation and...

"Did you at least get the license plate number?"

Wait...I had. I had. It was...what was it? "Um...wait, let me think...189...um..."

"Shelby...think!"

“NE12! 189-NE12!”

“Shelby. Listen to me. Call the police immediately. Do you understand?”

I give a pitiful cry of yes.

“I’m leaving work right this second. Call them, now!”

Call them, now! Her words reverberate inside my skull as I make the call to the police and blurt out everything in a long run-on sentence in between gasps for air, blubbling incoherently like an idiot. *Call them, now!*

I’d heard these words before, and as I lay in a ball on the couch weeping, wishing I had done the right thing and wanting desperately for Mom to arrive, broken fragments of recollections erupt inside me, unannounced and unwanted, blooming from a hardened bud: an old flip-phone left carelessly on the dryer in the basement. Mommy pleading me to pick it up.

Call them, now! But there’s danger in what she’s saying. Daddy will recognize his mistake and come back, and when he notices I’ve touched his phone, he’ll be angry. He’ll take me out into the yard where The Beast lives past the bones. *Call them, now!* I pick up the phone, but I can’t do it. I throw it toward Mommy, where it bounces off the bars of her room and drops to the floor in front of her, and I run halfway up the stairs in tears before I hear her cry her name over and over into the phone, revealing what I’ve never known and what I don’t entirely understand.

My name is Darcy Moser. My name is Darcy Moser. I was kidnapped by a man named Sam Samuels in September of 1995 in the town of Phillipsburg on the way home from school. We are on a back road somewhere I believe in Webster County, in a three bedroom ranch, locked in the basement. I’m with my six year-old daughter. I can’t stay on the line. I’m sure he’s on his way back home. Come quickly!

Come quickly, come quickly. I'm back on the couch, waiting for my mom to come home from work, and by the time she does I'm inconsolable, unable to utter a word of comprehension as I wonder about the damage I've done. She hugs me tightly and says, "You did it. My brave, brave girl." But I am not a brave girl. I've got a monster's cold, blue blood pulsing through my veins. After all, what is a monster but someone who thinks of no one's interests except her own? While I was eating Ramen Noodles and watching an episode on Netflix, thinking not a bit about what had happened to the car whose license plate I'd memorized, a boy was being shoved into a blue Blazer.

Except—I come to learn over time—the boy hadn't been shoved. He had gone willingly.

And his name was Jeff Jeffries.

More and more facts are revealed and more gossip spreads around school over the next few days, and I learn that when Jeff Jeffries's father came home from work early that day, he saw what appeared to be his son getting shoved into a car by two men and called the police, prompting the school district to send an alert. But his son had actually gone into the Blazer by choice; he knew his abductors, only they weren't his abductors: just sick fucks who pay for sex, and Jeff Jeffries was a boy who got paid for sex. Thanks to a phone call by someone who caught the car's license plate number, he was now back home and safe.

Safe, sure. But still messed up.

My mom says I'm brave for having helped a troubled boy out of a troubling situation. She says that in my short seventeen years, I've saved three people: Jeff Jeffries, my mom and me. But I don't feel the least bit brave, and I don't feel like anyone's been saved, least of all me. I know I'm beyond saving.

My brave girl. I'm six again, identifying the man I call Daddy for the police. He looks sad and tired, and I want to give him a hug and tell him about how I beat Mommy at Candyland three times in a row, but Mommy says I can't talk to him now, that the police need to see Daddy alone. I never see him again except online, where I study photographs of him sometimes, and they fill me with conflicting emotions, both haunting and happy. I've told myself a thousand times that I need to face him to move on, to somehow find a way to weave through this wicked world without hiding any more, but I've never even had enough courage to talk to my mom about it, much less go through with it.

Jeff Jeffries doesn't return to school the following week, and I wonder if he'll ever come back. I feel ashamed for not having made the phone call as soon as I got home, or for not going with him to his house or asking him to my house instead. It's my fault things turned out the way they did, and things were hard enough for him at school before; now they'd be impossible, with or without the long hair to hide his scars. I try to put myself in his shoes, but I don't know what I would do in his shoes except hide away, and that's exactly what he appears to be doing. It's also what I've been doing for over a decade.

I decide to use physics as an excuse to knock on his door one day after looking up his address in the school directory. He lives in a nice home, a well-kept Cape Cod with painted shutters not even half a mile from my own, and when I knock and his father answers and lets me in, I'm relieved that someone else is home. I tell him that I've got his son's physics homework in case he wants to catch up.

"Thank you," he says, and he puts his hand on my shoulder, but not in a weird way. It feels more like the touch of a man who's run out ideas and feels helpless to do anything for his

son: the boy whose life took a sharp turn toward insanity the day he rode his bike into a neighbor's driveway to turn around, only to be greeted by the jaws of a pit bull.

Mr. Jeffries points to a door and welcomes me to knock, and though I do, I feel uncomfortable about it, like I'm invading his private space. "Come in."

I inch the door open and say, "Hey. It's me, Shelby, from physics class. I've got your homework. Can I come in?"

"Sure."

I don't want to go in. The room is dark with the shades down, but I can make out Jeff Jeffries sitting on a chair in front of a laptop, motioning for me to sit down on his bed. *Be brave*, I tell myself, and I place the physics homework on the bed and sit down. I wait there for a moment, neither of us saying anything, before I finally blurt out, "Mr. Erickson is being even more of an asshole this week, so be glad you're..."

"You made the call." It's not a question. "To the police, I mean."

I nod and whisper "yes." He doesn't move, and though his long hair covers up most of his face, I can see his eyes, and I can't tell what emotion they're revealing or hiding, but I'm guessing anger.

"Please don't be angry. My mom called me after the alert and I..."

Jeff Jeffries pushes himself off the chair so quickly that I flinch and make a motion toward the door until I realize that he's only reaching for a lamp switch, and he then pulls his hair away from his face, revealing the wound. It really isn't so bad. I mean, easy for me to say, I know, but there's a pink line etched into his face that extends from his upper lip to his eye, with three sharp lines breaking off from the main one, and they don't scare me.

Jeff doesn't look angry. He doesn't look...*anything*. With his hair still pulled back, he steps toward me, crouches and kneels down so that his face is lower than mine, and slowly, apprehensively, leans in and presses his face against my chest. Instinctively, I place my cheek against his hair, and as we wrap our arms around each other, I can hear his words, soft and muffled, an almost silent whimper against my sweatshirt, "Thank you."

I hold him until it's dark outside, and though I know my mom will be filled with worry, I tell myself I'm not going to let go until he's ready. And I feel that maybe, just maybe, when he's ready for me to let go, I can begin to let go as well.