

Monster Food

When my sister and I were still just wee little runts back in '93, our mother used to hike us over to a playground out in a neighborhood -- that to us felt more like a mythical land than a residential area -- called Laurel Heights. Uphill, both ways. And we're talking San Francisco inclines — not your grandfather's hills. We would venture by foot *Lord of The Rings*-style from our home in the Tenderloin every weekend and usually one or two nights during the week when our mother didn't have to work terribly late. The bus was too expensive to continuously make that trip, so walking was our exclusive mode of transportation in those days. It was part of a strict military-inspired regimen Mama had designed for us: (pathologically distant) park three days per week, (humanely closer) library two days per week, and rigorous Math tutoring for me (my sister was barely old enough to formulate words at the time) by our uncle Omar on the off days. I'm still not convinced Mama wasn't a four-star general in a previous life.

"Mama," I would complain, "there is a playground, right there, across the street from our apartment. Why do we always have to walk so far?"

"You should thank me," she would hoke, "for not letting you become just another fat American."

My mother had a knack for casually winning debates before they could even draw breath. A real gift. It gave her a free pass to drag my sister and me, with minimal resistance, to that playground out in Laurel Heights, where the Asian kids had normal names and the white kids used exotic ones like Shira and Ezekiel. It exposed us to a drastically different existence than that of life in the Tenderloin, in ways I will always be too young to understand.

The Laurel Heights kids smiled with whiter teeth than the boys and girls in my kindergarten class. They smelled like soap and hardly ever sniffled. I entertained the prospect that their fecal matter smelled of lavender, but I couldn't say for sure since I wasn't convinced that their digestive systems required bowel movement. Most of them refused to talk to me or my sister and some would run to their parents if we got too close. As if it was by some unspoken but widely understood rule they were following.

The mothers all appeared to know each other — except for Mama, who sat by herself watching us play. As if all the mothers knew each other but Mama. Like from some club Mama was never invited to.

Still, she insisted I try to talk to the kids and become friends with them. This confused me because she told me to stay away from so many of the kids I went to kindergarten with. Somehow, these kids were better. As if one day they would be invited to some club — one that people like Mama could never be invited to.

She insisted. So we tried to make friends. Tried.

You see, there may have been a disconnect in how my mother perceived the aforementioned club and how the Laurel Heights mothers perceived it. My mother thought of it as a clique one could eventually join if one were to prove him or herself worthy. The other mothers seemed to view it as something you were born (or married) into and that any kid who had clearly walked over to their precious park from Other Parts was an unnecessary risk to leave their child around, even if supervised. And their children, the obliging conformists they were, complied more naturally than worker bees serving their power-crazy queens.

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The American Dream realized. I sit here in a cubicle, cashing in \$30 by the hour. Cha. Ching. My boss leans over, above my computer screen. She smiles. Tells me my design mocks won our firm the Michaelson account. I think about quipping “does that up my \$30 into \$40”, but stop myself short. “Remember,” I temper myself, “You’ve got a monster to feed.”

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But there were exceptions. A few months before my sixth birthday, I met Corrina. She looked to be at least seven-and-a-half years old, and her mother, always dressed in black and looking like she’d just awoken, didn’t even call her away any time I would try to say something to her. Whether or not this was because she was in her own world or because she legitimately encouraged her daughter to make friends with the non-natives would always remain open to interpretation.

Corrina: long-striped socks, thick-framed glasses of the nerdy-but-cool-in-a-few-decades persuasion, freckles, brown hair that bounced in an energetic trance, all-knowing eyes, persona to which no camera could ever do justice. She looked like she’d not only dressed herself in the morning, but also did her own shopping. Very cool. Not only that, but Corrina was the first between us to even say hello. The first! That was a first.

“Privier” would be a good word to describe her. Looking back, she had a way about her that suggested she saw the playground as a means of convenient congregation for parents lacking either (or both) the yard space or (and) creativity to neutralize their children’s bursting energy levels.

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Coffee room reeks of moldy bread. Still, my only escape from Out There. Windowless, it’s the most liberating part of the office floor. I hyperventilate, suffocating from claustrophobia.

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“Why do you talk to me?” I one day mustered up enough confident curiosity to stammer out to Corrina after another of her ritualistic greetings.

“I don’t know. Why do people talk to people?” She existentialized in response.

A confounding, intelligent question. One I’m still not quite sure I have a coherent, post-primal answer to. Wanting to at least sound like I could keep up, I stumbled in response, “So they can know each other?”

“Then there’s your answer.”

I wasn’t done though. She had to know the other kids and the secret that made them so special that their mothers did not want me in the same club as them.

“Are you part of the club?”

“What club?”

“The one my mom’s not allowed into but the other ones are.”

A blink of confusion in her eyes. I immediately regretted asking about the club. The idea sounded so much better in my head.

“I don’t know about any *club*,” she said. “But I do know about the monster.”

She looked at me and smiled nervously. As though I should have thought her mad.

“The monster?” I quickly forgot about my embarrassing question. Perhaps I would have indeed thought her mad, had I not been so grateful to have moved past my now-ridiculous sounding theory of “the club”. Moreover, as romantic of a proposition an exclusive club with restrictive membership parameters proposed, the possible existence of a monster merited considerably more concern.

“Yes, the monster! The one the grownups all have to feed. For real.”

Head reeling, I stopped my brain from convulsing into a downpour of questions suddenly boiling inside my skull. But before I could respond with anything, I noticed, from the corner of my young, energetic attention span, that my mother was watching us. I could sense her pride and hope in me having a friend who was a part of the club child of the monster feeders.

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Ducking in a bathroom stall, I reminisce. About my childhood, about that stupid park I met oh-what's-her-name. A hint of nostalgia. Rare, from my childhood.

The park, though! That's the key! I'll just close my eyes and think back to then. The Monster stories. Stories...

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After a series of serendipitous run-ins with Corrina over subsequent weeks, I began to get the feeling that Mama was patterning our trips to Laurel Heights based off Corrina and her mom's park schedule. My mother was a shy and overly humble woman, so it would be years before she could muster up the courage to actually speak to Corrina's mom beyond a simple nod and smile. Not that it ever went much further than that.

My sister was still young and lost in her own world. Though she was nowhere near old enough to read and still just approaching the ability to formulate coherent sentences, I could already tell she possessed an imagination far exceeding my own. I sometimes wondered if she was even aware of the other kids. Though distanced in both consciousness and years, we shared a special bond. It pained me to think children her age would deem her unworthy of associating with. That my mother likely felt the same way about me made me ever more self-conscious about my position in the playground social hierarchy.

Thank God for Corrina. Over the following months, the subject of The Monster would undertow our conversations — we quickly bonded over our shared fascination. However, it became quite clear she did not want to discuss the matter around any of the other kids. Almost too clear. Though she was unmistakably one of them (despite her willingness to converse with me, I still suspected that she too possessed a superhuman digestive system), Corrina avoided them like the plague. Since the other kids complied with what I deduced to be their parents' wishes, the arrangement worked out quite nicely and I was therefore able to learn more from her. Not just about The Monster but about the world. Her world. And through hers, mine.

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I watch the clock. Ten minutes. Another thirty seconds and this will look suspicious. Flushing time, on the dot. I go back to the monster's lair. It rests there, hungry but not starved. His flesh cold and scaly, he calmly flashes his teeth to me. Reminding. Warning. As if I could forget.

The glare in the beast's eye suggests he's been waiting patiently for me to arrive with my offering. Not because

he needs it, not even because he wants it.

Out of obligatory routine, more than anything.

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On several consecutive Library Days, I would scamper off browsing through bookshelves for writings on The Monster. It was important for me, even in those days, to get a more academic perspective. I even snuck in once to the Young Adult section. All this happened without explaining to my mother what I was doing, for I suspected General Mama would not have approved of my newfound obsession.

Though my ability to decipher meaning behind most assemblies of consonants and vowels was still primitive in those days, I made myself well certain I could identify the word “Monster”. I quickly found, however, the task too tedious to tackle on my own; the shelf space was over-abundantly choked with monster-related literature. Eventually, my emboldened curiosity overwhelmed my lingering pride and misplaced humility, so I enlisted the help of a librarian.

“Hi! Where are the books about The Monster?”

This — unsurprisingly — elicited a pointedly amused stare. “I’m sorry sweetie, but what monster are you interested in reading about?”

“The one you have to feed.”

“The one *who* has to feed?”

“You.”

“I’m sorry, the monster *I* have to feed?”

I nodded in that self-doubting yet all-knowing way only kids manage to pull off.

“What makes you think I feed a monster?”

“Because you’re a grownup.”

She laughed at my unshakeable conviction, like Bill Cosby on *Kids Say the Darndest Things*.

My cheeks flushed in embarrassment. For the first time since the concept of The Monster emerged into my life, I began to doubt its existence. Was Corrina just playing me the whole time? Was she some sort of cruel seven-year-old witch out to make a fool of me? Was I a fool?

Why was I so quick to believe her in the first place?

Perhaps there was a reason the other kids avoided me. At least the other kids had the courtesy of just leaving me alone. Perhaps, back at their school, Corrina would laugh about our Monster conversations with the other kids. Still, I had to give Corrina — and myself — the benefit of the doubt.

“I know I’m not a grownup yet. But I want to know abo-”

My last-ditched attempt at a request muted, drowned in my mother’s call for me from the women’s bathroom exit. Carrying my sister, she shuffled over to where I stood and exchanged a few good-humored words with the librarian. They laughed something casual about the imagination of a child. The librarian recommended *The Lorax* to my mother for me to read.

Corrina had a lot of explaining to do.

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I feed it. Just like last week. And the month before that. And the year before that. And the decades ahead. I'm quite good, they tell me. I'll rise fast. Tick. Tock.

But I need to stop thinking about it. That's the key. The less I think, the higher my ceiling. That's the key. Most people get it. They're just not very good at feeding. Most people...

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It was a week before I ran into her at the playground again. I spotted her hanging upside down on the jungle jim. She innocently waved as I marched over her way. I blocked out her verbal pleasantries and, a nervous wreck, dove straight into confrontation.

“Corrina. So. I went to the library. Yesterday. And...”

Reading my discomfort with her wise, all-knowing glare, she waited for me to calm my nerves enough to contin-

“They never even heard of The Monster!” I blurted.

Corrina pulled her legs forward and flipped to land back on the ground. She offered a playful chuckle, took my hand, and steered us towards the slide.

“Of course she said that. They don't want a kid knowing about The Monster! Imagine if all of us knew. Think if people found out about The Monster when they were kids!”

“What would happen?”

“Well.. I'm not sure. But I think they wait until it's too late to do anything else but feed The Monster before they tell you. Otherwise, people would run away!”

“To where?”

She had nothing, but I could tell from her contemplative stare into the city skyline from atop our playground hill she was genuine in her belief. Nevertheless, I had my doubts.

“Are you saying we should run away?”

Again, nothing.

“If kids can't find out about The Monster, are you saying my mom is lying to me?”

“Lying, or... she doesn't know.”

Mama wasn't the lying type. Especially on matters like this. If she knew about a monster I'd have to feed one day, she would have already started training me to feed it. She probably would have even tried introducing me to The Monster itself, just to make sure it knew my name enough to put me at the front of the feeding line when I would be old enough.

* * *

I knew this was coming. At least I have that to hold onto.

Soul - /sōl/ - n.

- 1. The indefinable, indescribable limb of human anatomy. Often thought intangible, until it is felt to depart.*
- 2. The only physical part of a human being that can be consumed by others without being labeled as cannibalism.*
- 3. A monster's favorite dish.*

* * *

“Well, how do *you* know then?”

She paused briefly, attempting to dig out an answer but struggling to find the words.

“Because... it sw-swallowed my dad,” she stuttered. “For real.”

Knot in stomach, I lost my appetite for answers. Unfortunately, that was barely even the appetizer — just her loading me up on bread.

“Every day, he went to The Monster’s lair. I don’t know exactly where, but over by the Ferry Building somewhere.”

“He told you about feeding it?”

“No, my Mom did. She never liked The Monster and wanted me to know about it. We would talk about it when me and my mom would wait for him at the Farmer’s Market and my dad wouldn’t be done with The Monster until late at night. Or even keep working the whole night! For real. He would come home tired and angry. The Monster made him mad. My mom says he was very good at it, so he had to feed The Monster longer than other people. This made him angry. He would leave every morning before I woke up and get home sometimes even after I went to bed. Always feeding. For real. So why did he keep doing it? Well, he said he couldn’t escape.”

“What’s ‘scape mean again?” I asked as we climbed up the slide ladder, standing at the highest peak on the playground on the hill. It was a clear, cloudless day and the sun shone bright. She squinted back at me and smiled, her seven years now showing in full bloom of sunshine.

“Good question. Run away?”

We sat down, feet dangling over the slide. No other kids nearby to complain we were hogging.

“On and on, my dad fed The Monster. He became tired and old. My mom tells me other people hated him because he was better at feeding The Monster than they were. And then, one day, he didn’t come back.”

We sat in what felt like would be a perpetual silence. I could barely make out her expression; the glare of the sun beamed right beside her face as she spaced out, almost as if she had forgotten she was talking to me. Or that I was even sitting there next to her. The rays, blinding, forced me to look away — proximity being the only cue I had into what she was feeling at this very moment.

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I long for those days. The park out in Laurel Heights. My memory of it: the only method I have left to confirm my soul remains intact. Even if slightly tilted and barely stable. Dangling on the wall. Shaking. Begging itself in place off the edge of a crooked nail.

The Monster beckons. I must oblige.

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Two kids approached the base of the ladder.

“Hey, we want to slide down!”

Corrina attempted to convene. A shakiness to her voice. A sniffle. I felt her swallow. The kids below became restless, but she paid them no heed.

“Hey!”

Corrina continued to ignore. Defiant in her tone, she picked up where she'd trailed off, "Other people, who also fed The Monster, they called and said Dad had been eaten. Swallowed whole. For real.."

One of the kids below started to climb the slide ladder.

"Hey, quit hogging!"

"I think we should move," I hinted.

Corrina stood up and turned his way, her shadow hovering over him as he glared up in irritation. "We're talking. There's another slide over by the swings."

I glanced over to see his expression. The exact opposite of understanding.

"But this one is bigger and faster."

"So?"

"That other one is the *baby* slide. Everybody knows that!"

"So?"

"SO QUIT HOGGING!"

The other one, his buddy, came around the front of the slide and started climbing up. Attack on both fronts. I looked over to find Mama — she was pushing my sister on the swings, over by the other slide. She looked over and waved towards me, giant grin spread between her ears. The exact opposite of understanding.

"Corrina," I pleaded. "We can talk over at the other slide."

Though I was perspiring cats and dogs, I did notice neither of the kids coming up would look me in the eye. Somehow, my overly observant insecurities still managed to manifest themselves even in such dire circumstances.

Corrina did not waver. She simply stood by where I sat, in defiance of both kids. "You were over in the field playing a game. Now that we're on the slide, you want to play on it?"

She kicked her foot on the step, right near the kid on the ladder's hand. A warning shot. He backed off a bit. The other kid slowly made his way up the slide. Emphasis on slowly. It was steep and frictionless — there was a reason they wanted to slide down it.

I didn't want any trouble. Mama wanted me to make friends, yet here I was gaining one net enemy. Not exactly what she (or I, for that matter) had in mind.

The kid stammering up the slide clung to the side railing and pointed to Corrina. "If you promise to slide, I'll go down."

"We promise," I blurted.

He continued on, as if I had said nothing at all. Or did not even exist. "I want you to promise."

Corrina scoffed. She was not giving up. Perhaps this sentiment stemmed from my narcissistic purview of the world, but it almost felt like it was more about standing by me than it was about the slide for her — even though I wanted so desperately to avoid any trouble. But I could only follow her lead.

Corrina whirled around when the kid climbing up the slide approached the top. The ladder kid quickly took advantage and lunged himself to match Corrina's footing on top of the slide. We were sandwiched in.

"GET OFF THE SLIDE!"

* * *

The punch-line is: I obsess how much better McCormick, and even Cho, are at feeding the damned thing. Grumble. Sulk.

It poisons what rare little time I still have to call my own. My morning showers. My evening dinner. My daydreams. My night dreams. My morning and evening commutes, riding the subway to and from The Monster's lair. All consumed by this obsession.

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Corrina gently fixated her focused eyes on mine. I'll never forget the look: a wild balance between fiery defiance and compassionate focus. She tilted her head, gaze still honed on mine. Sun completely blocked by her stature, I could do nothing but admire her poise.

"The only reason I am here is because of The Monster. Because my dad was so good at feeding it. For me to be here, my dad fed and fed until he fed himself."

"What is wrong with you? MOVE!"

"For real."

"Loren!" One of the mothers from the Mother's Club raced to the slide.

"Elias!" Another mother darted our way.

"What is going on here?"

"They're hogging the slide!"

"They're trying to fight us and they won't share!"

All grown-up eyes fixed on me. The entire Mother's Club. Eyes wide-eyed. Panicked. Fearing for their kids. Their children's innocence corrupted. By yours truly. Corrina's mom just sat, zoned out into space from the park bench.

I looked towards the swings. Mama was in her own world as well, playing with my sister. I felt so small.

"You!" shouted one of the mothers at me. "Stop picking on my son!"

"Where are your parents?" demanded the other one.

I sat frozen in silent panic. I looked at Corrina, who was glaring at the kid who came up the slide, enraged. I couldn't even think, my senses completely deafened by the gravity of the moment.

"I'm sorry, I-"

"Where are your parents?"

My parents? They had to have seen my mother bring me to this park a thousand times. I recognized both of their faces, their peach and melon-colored lipsticks, their diamond and golden necklaces, their blonde and carrot hair, their soulless.... *my parents?*

"My dad is dead," I allowed, directing my words only towards Corrina. "He was eaten by The Monster too. Before I was born, my mom and him moved here fr-"

"WHERE ARE YOUR PARENTS?!"

Corrina darted her eyes from one kid to the other.

"They moved here because they thought it would be a better life here if my dad could come and feed The Monster.

I didn't realize it before, but that's what it was. I don't think he—"

Corrina's defiance softened beneath the shade of the greying, fluffening sky. Her gaze dropped in contemplation.

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Momentarily, I'll remind myself of the thousands of minions who wish they could match my feeding talent. As sad as it is, that somehow makes it all feel better. Less claustrophobic. I even convince myself it's the nail balancing my soul on the windowless wall of my existence. Perspective, They call it.

* * *

"Fine. We'll get off the stupid slide."

One at a time, we each slid down. Corrina put her arm around me as we walked back to the jungle gym.

"My dad was eaten," I realized aloud, "because he wasn't good at feeding the monster. So he kept trying harder. Until it ate him."

"For real?"

"It didn't swallow him whole, like your dad. It chewed him up. The same way it chewed my friend Manny when it thought it was his dad but ate Manny instead. Where I live, people feed The Monster too. It never swallows whole though. Never."

Corrina clutched my shoulders a little tighter. I looked back towards my mother, swinging my sister — lost in her blissful world — burying her knowledge of The Monster within. It was only then that I realized she likely knew The Monster better than almost any of the grown-ups from Corrina's world.

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But then, in those precious seconds I have between sleep and awake, dream and aware, delusion and acceptance, I think back to oh-what's-her-name. From the park. I wonder what came of her. What she might look like. How she looks back on those days. If she looks back on those days.

And what she would think if she saw me now. Like this. Hand reached out, hesitating to avoid The Monster's chomping.

I wonder if she managed to make it out. I think back to this. More than my therapist, who once even doubted oh-whats-her-name's existence, informs me can be described as healthy. Damn therapist, I've got a monster to feed. And this is the only way I know how. For real.

* * *

"Do you think we'll ever have to feed The Monster?"