

# Mary's Monster

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A play by Maggie Lou Rader

*“Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.”*

— Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

*(Bell strikes 9:00pm, MARY is digging. She is dirty, her clothes are torn, her face is filthy)*

MARY:

The veil is thin, between this world and the next. Spirits walk with us, in our minds and dreams rendering us utterly... crowded. They speak to us in whispers and stand in shadows waiting for a glance, a moment to connect. They are patient, mostly kind, and absolutely, ever, increasingly, *(child's laughter heard and light DL flickers)* present. So where have you been?

*(MARY pauses her digging and pulls out a roll of cloth. During the next few moments, she unrolls it, unveiling tiny bundles, a few letters, a manuscript, and one larger object wrapped in paper. She sets them around the hole strategically. They're standing ready)*

Time is short *(winces from pain in her head)*, but today, it's fleeting, well, for me at least. However, hours *can* contain a lifetime, if they must, for the dead don't carry timepieces, and Death has been my only *constant* companion in this life. Following me into my home, my bed, and now my mind, channeling itself through me to all I've touched in this world.

I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes. I had determined, once, that the memory of those evils should die with me; however, now choosing to alter that determination, I find myself with the high hopes their relation might bring us together again. I do not know if the knowledge of my misfortunes will be helpful to you, yet, if you are inclined and able, hear me. And if you hear me, will you speak? I believe that these strange incidents connect us and may enlarge your faculties for understanding. You will hear of powers and occurrences many believe impossible, but doubt not, my tale conveys truth. But you already knew that.

*(Low thunder draws MARY's attention, the thunder turns into a spoiled, dramatized scream of a childish tantrum)*

**Fanny**

“What could be the catastrophe today?” I'd ask you upon hearing our stepsister Jane's daily tantrum. “I'm guessing she put her shoes on the wrong feet.” “Oh, I don't know. Or maybe there wasn't enough lace added to her stockings.” “Or maybe she cleaned her mirror only to discover that *is* the actual size of her nose.” I could always count on you, my darling sister, for a tiny chuckle at our wicked step-sister, Jane's, expense. Inevitably, we'd hear Jane's trivial cause for alarm, “My stockings have no fluff!” “I owe you a two pence, Fanny.”

When Father married Jane's mother, the Widow Clermont, I began sneaking out *every* day to visit our mother for some respite from their violent tempers and daily screaming. I say "Widow Clermont," but when you lie about multiple, dead fake husbands to protect your own image, that makes you more of the Bitch of Clermont, doesn't it? We could always retreat to each other for solace from the whirlwind that was our new step family, couldn't we Fanny dear?

As angry as I was with Father for bringing the Clermonts into our lives, I couldn't help but respect his unending dedication to our mother, reading us her journals before bed, keeping her portrait up in his study for all to see, raising you as his own daughter without a second thought.

I used to ask Father endless questions about our mother, to which I already knew the answer. "Father, did Mother Mary like to write stories?" And he would say she did. And I would ask, "Father, did Mother Mary like telling people what to do?" And he would say she did. And I would ask, "Father, why did you name me after Mother Mary?" And he'd say things like, "Because you're intelligent like her." "Why else?" "Because you're inquisitive like her." "Why else?" "Because your humor cuts like her." "My humor doesn't cut." "It's cutting dear." "It's NOT cutting!" "I say it's cutting." "Well if it's cutting, it's only cutting because yours is so frightfully dull!" Father was right about so many things.

Like the fact that you were always more of a lady, but I was more of an adventure. "Fanny, where do you want to go most in the world?" You see, I'd ask *you* all sorts of questions, trying to stir *some* sense of desire in you. "Um, I'm not sure... The Tower of London?" "The Tower of London?!? The Tower of London is practically in our own backyard! Where in the *whole wide world?!?!?*" "Ummm... maybe Kensington?" "You've missed the point Sister, dear."

I learned that you worked hard to forget our mother, Fanny. I hated you for that as a child, no even when we were grown. For you had *real* memories with her and I had to imagine a history that encompassed our whole ten days together before she passed from this world into the next. I imagined her cradling me, knowing I would continue her writing legacy. That she'd whispered the secrets of her brilliance in my tiny ear and that I need only focus very hard and I'd suddenly remember. Though only ten days had passed, I would be preserved with enough of her knowledge and presence to navigate my way through life.

I brought you to our mother one day, Sister dear. I grabbed your hand to weave us in between the stones. "Hurry up; this way!" Ugh, you were like pulling lead. "God, Fanny, you can be such a

Clermont..." "Where are we going?" "To my most secret and favorite place." I dragged you, bobbing from tree to tree constantly shushing your questions since a service was happening just a few yards away and the mourners in black began turning to see who could be making such a racket. "Here we are!" "Why did you bring me here?" "Because it's as close to Mother Mary as we could possibly be, isn't it grand?" "It's unfortunate," you said as you hurried home, never looking back.

---- (MARY hears something close by and turns quickly to see if she's not alone.)

Words can haunt just as strongly as spirits, you, my darling sister knew that too well. Words are the lasting legacy of the dead, living on long after we're laid to rest. They can raise us, cut us, but they can seduce us too. God... Percy, your words cut to my innermost soul.

### Percy

"Whose is the love that, gleaming through the world,  
Wards off the poisonous arrow of its scorn?  
Whose is the warm and partial praise,  
Virtue's most sweet reward?"

Your recital was the first sound I heard as I walked through the door of our home that autumn, upon returning from a summer in Scotland. I had gathered a few things. First, that you, the "glorious Percy Shelley" had endeared yourself to my Father by flattering his mind, and even better, the publications of my mother. Secondly that you were an up-and-coming poet with quite a bit of promise, as well as a reputation for being somewhat of a trouble-maker. And lastly, that my wicked stepmother had insisted you visit... to try you on for size for Jane, I assumed.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever: it will never pass into nothingness." "Ah... Keats. Is it not, Mr. Shelley?" "Good ear." "You romantics' and your focus on beauty has been the downfall of my sex, for, if 'taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.'" Recognition, a laugh. "Your mother *was* brilliant. I've often said she was to philosophy what Keats is to poetry. You speak of cages, but us 'Romantics,' only seek to empower the voices who call for freedom and liberty." "Yes, freedom and liberty for men, Mr. Shelley. Or, do prove me wrong and please recite me the words of an equally famous *female* Romantic." Stunned and silence. "Women are well cared for in our world, for *tenderness* is the name for a lover's most exquisite sensation; *protection* is his most generous and heart-thrilling impulse." "You speak of freedom for your voice and protection for mine. 'Children, I

grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness.' Do you find me weak, Mr. Shelley?" "No," you said, eyes alive, "No, I do not Mary."

I escaped to my father's study to find my breath. Looking upon the portrait of my mother hanging above his desk, I was filled with gratitude for her words that had served both as my sword and armor just moments before in an intoxicating battle with your mind, Percy. Then, I heard the door crack open and without turning around, I muttered, "Meet me in the garden tonight." A quick hush fell, before the door softly closed.

Every nerve bouncing with anticipation, I paced in my room waiting for Father's, then Fanny's, and finally Jane's doors to close for the night. I swept down the stairs without a sound and waited in the garden for you to arrive. A short eternity passed as I began to doubt, "What if it hadn't been you in the study? What if you'd decided not to meet me? What if I was completely losing my mind and the door hadn't opened at all and I began questioning every power in the universe as to what has possessed me to be so foolish in the first place, when I felt your hand touch mine. "Follow me."

I took you through the dark, along the path I'd followed every day of my youth, leading you to the grave of my mother. "Why did you bring me here?" "Because this is where I'm most alive in this world," I whispered as I slowly began exploring your chest with my hands. Life was before us and we rushed into possession. Our fates were sealed then, Percy.

That night we put in motion events that would mold the rest of our lives. Come 5:00 in the morning, we would sneak out together, catch a ship, and set sail for France, together, never looking back.

I couldn't contain my excitement, walking on tiptoe back into the house, anxious for morning to arrive. I had just stepped into my room, when the door, unaided by my hand, swung shut behind me. I turned around to see Jane. "Hello sister," she smirked. "What are you doing, Jane?" I asked, trying to encourage her to lower her damn voice. "Just coming for a chat. You see, I saw you sneak out and decided to follow you." "What did you see Jane?" "Oh, please. I know exactly what you've done." What I'd done? Percy, I came alive that night! "What do you want?" "For you and Percy to take me to France." "You can't be serious, you human doorstep!" "Oh I'm serious because this doorstep could awaken the house and tell your father what you're up to, but most importantly, this doorstep knows French." The doorstep had a point and joined us the next morning on the ship. Did you mind her company, Percy?

Six weeks of hope, glory, love, and words carried us through the beautiful French countryside. Blameless ambition was our guide, and our souls knew no dread. It was then my writing took on a mind of its own. Words poured from my pen as I created as if possessed by a fever. And Percy, it wasn't you necessarily, but your faith in my mind as a creator. Isn't it amazing how impressive we become when others *expect* our brilliance? You put me on a pedestal held up by the works of my mother and father and set me going. I loved you for that. I loved you for that, then. Remember that day we passed the little chapel near Lyon? You asked me, "Shall I make an honest authoress out of you?" "I'd rather you help make me a successful one." We decided that day that, for us, marriage was a matter of the heart and not the law.

Father wasn't so convinced, however, for when we arrived home, we found his doors shut to us until we found ourselves, "respectfully married." Isn't it funny how liberally men preach their progressive ideals to everyone but their own daughters?

We found out something else after arriving home. Moments after disembarking the ship, I vomited all over the dock, and luckily, Jane's new French suede shoes. I'd been seasick before, this was different. Oh, my god, how life had changed. I was a prolific writer in love with a genius, now with a child on the way. If time is relative, those moments contained eons.

We had one intoxicating month together at home before *her* letter arrived:

*"Dear Percy,*

*I find myself in my fourth month and utterly alone. I felt it only right to let you know you are to be a father.*

*Sincerely,*

*-Harriet"*

*(Pause.)* I had questions. So I asked you, darling, calmly and collectively, "Who the fuck is Harriet?!?" "Harriet... is my wife." *(Pause.)* I had more questions. "I met the unfortunate girl when she was living with her abusive father; I only married her to free her from the maniac. We have no passion; *she* has no thirst for conversation, no drive for knowledge." "No, no, this is unforgivable Percy; you're an adulterer!" "Well so is she. I had wanted to save her reputation, but I was not the first to step outside our bonds of marriage, Mary." You assured me the relationship was quite over,

and after much scolding, I forgave you and insisted we see to it the child be provided for. “Of course, Mary. Of course we will.”

---- *(MARY sees her wedding ring and comes back to reality. She slips off the ring and looks at it.)*

Promises are always meant, but in the end they are only emphatic intentions. And even if they are kept, sometimes you wish they weren't. Promises can give a fleeting peace, but maybe that's enough. *(She drops the ring in the grave.)* Percy gave me many things, some of which he promised, one of which he didn't. He gave me joy, support, heartache, but most importantly, he gave me motherhood. For never having dreamt of ever having a child myself, I reveled in wonder as my body slowly transformed into something I didn't recognize, growing with distinct purpose. I will forever be thankful to Percy, for without him, I'd never have had you.

----- *(MARY winces from pain in her head. The pain moves to her abdomen.)*

### **Clara**

AAAAaaah!! You tore into this world with a jolt. I cried out for your father as I was being thrust into the experience of motherhood in a painful rush of light. I felt your weight shift and sway and sit back too, too far. But I fought with every fiber of my being and muscle in my body to help you cling to life for that brief moment of existence. I could never explain the powers which bore me onwards. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, me, breaking through to push your torrent of light into this dark world.

And what a light you were, my darling girl. As I held your tiny, wiggling, bubbly figure, I felt the complete power and awe of bringing your tiny personhood into being. And Clara, I know the word 'perfect' is used all too frequently when describing newborns, but I can think of no other word that would bring you justice. You were the perfect manifestation of any collected goodness between your father and me.

On your tenth night on this earth, around three in the morning, I stopped in your room for a feeding, but you were so peacefully sleeping, I dared not awaken your dear heart.

“She's gone,” were the first words I heard the next morning. “She's gone, she's gone, my dear, she's gone!” Your father's voice slowly sank into my waking ears. I shoved him aside and scrambled and clawed my way out of bed and pulled myself through the hall. My limbs, numb with sleep, could not

keep pace with the terror that drove me to move. I finally grappled my way into your room and saw that Clara, you looked just as you had the night before, angelic and peaceful as ever. I scooped you up in my arms, expecting you'd wake or cry or scream or absolutely anything! But you didn't flinch. Your skin was cold and fixed. In that moment, my joy forever ceased, for it was in that moment that I knew, the light which I had willed and forced into this world, was out.

Your color never faded as I laid you in the ground. I took one last look at your porcelain face, half expecting your little eyes to flash open at any moment. I thought, with what little effort it might take to bring your rosy cheeks back to the world of the living. The guilt I felt laying your tiny body in the ground has never left me. For Clara, you've haunted my dreams ever since. I dream, even now, that you had only been very cold and that I rubbed your little feet by the fire and you came back to us, living, bright as ever. I think about you, my precious little girl all of my days.

---- *(MARY is back to the present.)*

The pain of losing a one and only child is awful. Grief is obstinate and the heart can freshly break a hundred times a day with every passing memory. But of course, death is near to everyone, and why should I describe a pain which all have felt? I didn't know then what I know now. The dead *can* come back to us; they don't always come back nice. *(MARY unwraps a lock of Clara's hair.)* Would a monster for a daughter be better than no daughter at all? *(MARY drops the lock of hair into the grave)* I'll keep Clara in my dreams. *(A pain in her head as thunder rolls overhead)* It was you who taught me what real horrors the dead bring back with them. For it was you, Victor Frankenstein, who taught me how our own creations bring our downfall.

---- *(Lighting flashes.)*

### **Victor Frankenstein**

"Reanimation," Byron said, "is the matter at hand. Is galvanism possible? (I don't know) Can technology bring the dead back to life?" It was the year without a summer in Lake Geneva and I was holed up in a cabin with Percy, Lord George Byron, Byron's new plaything, everyone's favorite doorstop, Jane, and though I didn't know it yet, your shadow loomed overhead, Victor.

An incessant rain often confined us to the house for days, reading stories aloud in front of the fire. Our fare soon turned from dark to darker, giving way to the mood of the weather and ghost stories became our nightly entertainment. The cottage soon grew too small for Byron's ego as he grew tired



of the “droll hacks” of Bavaria. Byron who never respected my integrity as a writer nearly as much as my “perfectly proportioned bosom,” proposed a challenge to the group. “Let us each retire from his *droll* collection-” see, it was so cute when he learned a new word, “and, if you’re up to it,” he said, looking squarely in my direction, “write a ghost story to be shared with the group. And please don’t mistake my convivial demeanor, this *is* a competition.”

I couldn’t care less. Only months had passed since Clara’s death and my heart and mind were dull to the whetstone of inspiration. Percy’s affection grew cold. He had fallen in love with a thriving genius, not a depressed, fruitless writer. My only happiness was in the recurring dream of Clara’s reanimation in front of the fire. She lived on, but only in those precious, brief moments of sleep. “Have you thought of a story yet, Mary dear?” Byron would ask every morning as I woke from slumber. And, every morning, I’d continue our new mortifying ritual by replying, “No, Byron, not yet.”

Weeks passed and the air around me began to feel full of energy, hungry. (*The low sound of static is heard.*) A high-pitched, practically silent, power, like the charge before a lightning strike, vibrated somewhere between my ears and the skin of my arms. This, electric... “Static” filled our cottage as my companions seemed able to harness bits and pieces of it and ghost stories poured from their minds. I, however, only felt your presence slowly beginning to break through the veil and tap into my world. But, the night you finally emerged in my dreams was the most terrifying of my life.

*(During her dream, we hear the low static and rolling thunder.)*

I saw you, a pale student of the unhallowed arts, kneeling beside the hideous phantasm of a man, or rather, pieces of a man that had been unholily connected, stretched before you on a table. And then, with the connection of some powerful engine, the creature was given a jolt, a force making it jump and shake, flailing in ungodly directions. But even when the engine shut off, the creature stirred with an uneasy, half vital motion, standing on its own volition. A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly. Its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its shape, more hideous than could belong to humanity, stood before you. Frightful it was, both the image of the wretch and your ungodly power, mocking the Creator of the world.

I tore through the night scraping, writing, sketching, giving bones to the vision you had wracked my sleeping brain withal. Your life began to take shape, and the horror grew with every page. I created straight through until morning. When I emerged and was greeted with Byron’s smug, “Have your

thought of story yet, Mary dear?" Gleeefully I able to reply, "Why yes George; yes I have, why don't you take a seat?" and I read to them the short story of you, Victor Frankenstein and your creation. God! It's delicious to see men of ample words have none.

Percy pulled me up the stairs and, for the first time in months, looked at me with those same bright electric eyes, bringing me back to our first night together in the graveyard. He took me in his arms, held me close, and whispered in my ear, "You're not done, Mary dear." And he was right. Our journey was just beginning, Victor.

----- *(Lightning strikes. bringing MARY back to reality.)*

God, time is dense and memories conflate, running side by side dragging, cutting steaks in the mind leaving you wondering when time passed. And people who had always been by your side, are suddenly gone. And once gone, they only come back on their own terms. The dead linger in the moment of their death forever. They don't age, they can't learn, and they *never, ever*, forgive. Not yet, anyway.

### Fanny

*My dearest Fanny,*

*I have another favor to ask of you dearest Sister. As if you weren't already saving my life by caring for the children during this busy time, could you bring Mother's journals when you come? I'm a bit stuck with the book and could use a nudge from her brilliance.*

You arrived the day I learned that, if left unattended, in the time it took for me to answer the door, a toddler could eat half of a candle and manage to cover the entire left side of her body in black ink. In just a few short years the voices of two small and loved children filled our house with more life and noise and love than I had previously thought possible. Percy and I were beside ourselves with joy! My little William was born on the brightest day the world had ever known. Our daughter, Clara Everina, who carried the namesake of our first born, arrived just a bit over a year later. She had a strength and stubborn streak that, though I knew would serve her well in this male-dominated world, sure made it hard to keep her in *any* clothing, much less a petticoat. I called on you, my darling sister, to be an extra set of hands as I tried to play the role of brilliant authoress with two small children in tow.

