

his hair. The trees turn over and sigh, sleepers or lovers,
arms twined around one another for comfort.
Something in the world must love him.
Must want him alive—his hands, the soles of his feet,
the veins in his neck, the roots of his hair.
He wants to live so he feigns death. For three days
unmoving in the snow, his bones brittle as hatred,
so cold he could break.

Michael Chaney

Horror Movies with Mom

In 1979 Mom took us to see *Dawn of the Dead* in Akron, Ohio. Halloween City, USA. I remember there being a haunted schoolhouse, a haunted laboratory, and haunted hayrides galore. At that time of year, it wouldn't have been unusual to see plastic vampire teeth at Sunday school.

Heading to the drive-in my brother and I shared the backseat of our brown Pontiac. The car had only two doors but vinyl acreage for elbows and popcorn. Mom was a skilled dressmaker and that year my brother wanted a checkerboard outfit with patches of white and black. I was a demon. My costume was easy enough for me to make by myself. Yellow sheet. Fake blood from a white tube. Aforementioned plastic vampire teeth. Presto.

While in Cleveland we listened to soul music on AM 1490. Harold Melvin, the O-Jays, the Commodores. But at the Akron drive-in we probably laughed at whatever was on the radio, half scared anyone might overhear. Eventually, the airwaves splashed the inevitable—that Boris Karloff imitator working in his “lab late one night” or the good old boy who “ain't gonna let no haint” run him off.

I was eight. The opening scenes of *Dawn of the Dead* bailed out my nerves then flooding with close looks and crew cuts and faces my skin color—raining in from the other cars. What haints were they looking at? My stepfather at the wheel in a burgundy leather blazer and denim cap? My mother, hair like a lion's mane, smoking menthol cigarettes in dark sunglasses too big for her face? Or my brother and I inhaling second-hand race and class resentment along with handfuls of buttery popcorn?

I remember my mother adjusting the speaker by her window so we could hear. Sirens. The ghetto. A SWAT team kicks the door in. It's a raid. Until that woman (no junkie I've ever seen) sinks her ashen face into that man's neck and three thick rivulets of blood jet down his back.

Did they hit the floor before my jaw?

Rivulets 1. Jaw zip.

I went on to lose more, thanks to horror movies. All sense of security in water, for one thing. That happened after Mom got us to watch *Jaws* on cable. I found that ironic, as she never came to the beach with us. Neither did my stepfather, except for that time I was six and that old man called him the N-word.

Unlike those spaces, this viewing would happen in the safety of our own living room. No one else there to gawk at the mixed-race family. Plus, it's carpeted. What could go wrong?

Plenty, as it turned out. For starters, there's that scene of the girl treading water. How symbolic. She's happy, waving. Fortuitous for us. We're spectators. We don't mind a bit of the arena to spatter our commoners' robes. Bad news semaphore flags for her, however.

The tug that pulls her from her chin-above-waves presumption lurks in every waterlogged scene. It pulsates from the depths and rapidly diminishing silences of the song (until you become the silence and satiate the musical beast's heart rate). And I have been certain that the same evil hides in the underthigh gullies of every bath I've taken since. It is always just one smooth Jacuzzi tile away from the pads of my toes. I'm still certain of it. As sure as I am that no malevolence whatsoever swims in that dreadful model—claymation's usurper—the visible shark of *Jaws*.

The shark we see falls far short of the one we don't. It's the shark we can't see that scares us, the one beneath the waves. The film glimpses those depths but it can't take us to them. Except at the cellular level, of course, where the swimmer's final terrors are written in ancient books, tattooed on orphans, and repeated by cloudy-eyed passersby, bums or cabbies or the elderly (any oracular deformity will do in a pinch—a sty, even a patch). There are blurrily evil eye exams for us to fail in the still frames of horror movies.

Maybe Mom knew that. Maybe that is why she squinted with delight to see those *Hellraiser* films. It was the 1980s and though everyone had a video movie night, ours was organized around Vidmark, anything fanged, and blood, bathtubs full of it. *Crazy Fat Ethel*. *Motel Hell*. *I Spit On Your Grave*. *Suspiria*. Four for the weekend brings your worship of kitsch to crisis by the Sabbath at last.

Where's *my* reverence, you wonder.

Check one cupboard: nothing. Check another: IT'S THE CAT! Sigh and turn around. Right into that electrical sandwich knife you swore didn't even work when Grandpa got it for you two black Christmases ago

but which you never used due to the fact that grandpa is a psychopathic killer who wears a mutilated pig for a veil.

Sure, there's laughs. High times with hilljacks doing their horror honky-tonk at the dinner table of a dilapidated house in the South. Like Ben, *Candyman* knows all about *them*. He can handle it. *Only more will come once they find out about us*—says the black man to the white woman in the house being surrounded by blood-thirsty white men. Candyman's got the honey for that molasses. Say his name in a mirror backward and he'll blink for you.

Have you heard the latest about horror movies? They've got spells in the dissolve shots. Ghosts melt into your house as you watch. They hide under the bed and wait. They will come for you on the stairs. You knew this would happen. You even imagined it yourself, how it'd be. Were you to die, you'd *want* to be the demon behind that door, reaching through the balusters for any who dare to pass. *Hellraiser* scats that lesson and other jazz.

The Cenobites are the house band. They get to their gigs through the walls. Their agent is a puzzle box. Boxy calls them in and takes his cut. Their arrival is heralded by the toll of a church bell. My mother would speak the lines along with their Demon Boss during these entry scenes. A real leather drag brigade. Pins and needles through the face, neck, nose and lips, nipples, and probably places the R rating can't show. That's the kind of crew *Hellraiser* rolled with. They have a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* vibe at first. As the narrative progresses, they seem less kinky and more like demons, the usual kind. They'll leave you with that forks-in-the-eyes afterglare of visual torture. One's got his jaw rigged up and chatters like it's zero degrees. His wired skull is rat bones and baby teeth in maracas. The Boss has a face on which too many rounds of *I'll sink your battleship* have been played. Each pin on the map is the True North of desire and death, pleasure and pain.

My mother inflicted this video on us with relish. She'd ask you to take out the trash or mow the lawn and if you made a mopey face she'd taunt you with lines from the movie: "Little Michael, so eager to take out the trash, yet so reluctant to admit it."

I've since had occasion to wonder about my mother's sense of appropriateness. There was that time in the fifth grade she took my friend Glen and me to the first *Friday the 13th* movie. I think it was more the people around us than her, but soon she wanted us to leave. It was during a sex scene. She stood up, waved her arms, and said, "Get up. It's time."

Time? We wanted to leave back when the auger uncorked that guy's

Adam's apple. Now when it was something we wanted to see, now she takes her stand?

She did and out we went. I remember she gave a speech in the car. It was that theater's fault for showing a movie like that. I don't know if Glen bought it but I'm pretty sure he didn't give a shit. Nor did I, nor did anyone ever—although seeing the echo chamber doesn't stop us from singing into it, does it? Hello? For fear of who or what will respond. *Hello?*

Over the years we would watch many horror movies together, my mother and I. We got into the habit of classifying the parts. There's the "snapshot from hell." An example is the skull face that jumps out of the satanic darkness in the *Exorcist*, interrupting the narrative. An increase in speed produces similar results, as in *Jacob's Ladder*, whose demons appear in the ordinary world—from the grocery store aisle or the school bus window—as abominable gyrations, extra tempo, vibrating into the surreal. Volume has the same effect. Ask anyone who's ever heard the classic H. G. Wells's *Invisible Man* lately—but speak up when you ask because they may have suffered hearing loss. The dials on the maniacal laughter in that film go up to eleven *and a half*.

It's all about pacing, emotional rhythm. That's why the formulas are so stark in the horror genre, so orthodox. There must be that sacrificial Trojan Lamb of horny teens in a van, off yet again to the scary woods as if maybe, if they're totally lucky, dude, they will leave in (one) peace.

When you look deep enough, isn't there something subversively religious about horror movies? In their stricture and their ritual sacrifices? Their nostalgic returns to supernatural violence? Hosea in the horror.

Of course it's not fair to lay this load onto horror movies alone. I can think of another inappropriate film my brother and I got taken to by another parent. Our biological father took us to see what would have been considered children's viewing: *The Apple Dumpling Gang* or *Herbie Rides Again*. But *Animal House* was the first film I remember seeing with him and Oh boy! did that bacchanalia ever unfold, full frontal, orgiastic. I was six years old. No one got punished for John Belushi's ladder-hopping peeping Tom routine. Not really. People thought that felony misdemeanor knee-slappingly hilarious. How different the reaction to youth and sex in horror films! A Puritan scree, the horror film is an angry deacon squeezed into the clown car of genre, honking with rage for the sins of youth.

By way of religion, my mother got into the spooky stuff. Wikken, Eckenkar, paganism of every stripe. That's what drove her interest in candles, incense, and incantations around those spots in the house where energies lingered. Needless to say, I developed a flair for the sarcastic on such

occasions. One time, my mother somehow wrangled her biological father, Grandpa Otis, into our kitchen for a séance.

Mom was bilingual as well as biracial. She grew up in Germany, a lonely brown child in a country white hot with guilt. She excelled at their stricter measures for everything. She was a convincing woman when she had to be and this was one of those times.

There was a Ouija board on the dining room table. Candles were lit. There was hand holding and humming in unison. I have a Polaroid of my mother from that time. She's wearing a sarong, smoking a cigarette, and laughing. Her lion's mane of hair is the brown halo of a smiling sun. She is Pinky and Lena Horne, Ronnie Spector and Pecola, the "Chiquita banana woman" one friend said to me once in elementary school. In a turtleneck sweater with dark sunglasses and riding in the Pontiac with my step-father, she would check herself in the rearview mirror.

My mother often casted herself as a scream queen, a beautiful mouth-piece of grievance and injury. But she had range and often played the swarthy gypsy woman, pointing at your dismal future in her crystal ball with a ruby-horned finger and an ink-painted nail. Maybe it was because her American blackness was never fully accepted by her German friends and family members growing up that the *general* other, the Gypsy, appealed to her so much.

She followed up the hand holding with murmuring, thumping, and stomping under the table. The wood of the house was alive to the racket. She had the whole family in on it. Spirit talking and humming, she let her head loll around on her neck and her eyes roll back. I was holding her hand and remember wanting to let go. She was about to speak from the spirit's voice when my grandfather interrupted the whole thing with a gesture. He was a big man, one of the first black MPs to be stationed in Russelsheim, Germany, after World War II. He was the kind of person who could wave one massive catcher's mitt of a hand and call the whole thing off, no matter what that whole thing was.

I remember after he did it, he winked at me, and after people started talking to each other again, he said, hushing us all again: "When Angie was in the middle of it, I thought for the life of me the refrigerator was about to grow legs and walk right on out of this kitchen."

He said he was glad, for one, that it didn't. Me too. I kept my Kool-Aid in there, thoroughly haunted with ice cubes and lemon wedges. Should the pitcher fall as the appliance made its escape, it would sound like the scene in *The Omen* when the woman leaps from the balcony.

The sound of it. With all the delight of a singing *au pair* sans flying

umbrella, the demonic governess hangs herself from heights so that her body slams in the slack. She crashes ear-piercingly through an upstairs window. All the upscale garden party guests gasp in horror. And the film is cruelly public to show us their reaction, which is also our reaction, to an abominable sacrifice. *This is for you, Damien!* She sings it happy as a flower child, no doubt the historical referent for her mirth, so out of sync with the shrieking windowpanes below.

The sound of shattering glass is the horror film's way of spelling trauma with the plchette of the speaker. In horror films, glass breaking says rupture and fragility as well as *here it comes*—what you signed up for. Life is seldom so well behaved as your typical horror movie. No dog is as loyal.

Prose knows different tricks and barks at other terrors.

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My mom and my stepfather were living in Akron with Oma and Opa. They were getting off the drugs and going to a methadone clinic every day. They lost the house and everything else and now they were ridding themselves of that last bad habit, intravenously gone but not forgotten. The need for it must have transferred to whatever it was still making them so drowsy that their cigarettes burned the carpet beside their bed. If you were clever enough, exuberant enough, or insane enough, and had you the marbles for it, you might play a game shooting marbles into those little charred divots in the carpet for points and glory.

But neither my brother nor I were in the mood to criticize my mother (or to run carny games on her floors, however fun they'd be once you got a feel for the tread and the lie). She was doing better. No longer raccoon-eyed, she would talk at some length about her feelings, old guilt and new joy. It was awkward and I loved every weird moment of it.

When I came to visit, she and my stepfather would take me to the movies at the mall. I had never seen more movies with her than at that time. They went every day, having developed an appetite for the movies in tandem with their return to solid foods.

I remember going to see the remake of *Lost in Space* with them. We used to watch that show as a family during the seventies and eighties. And here it was again on postmodern culture's hotdog rotisserie. The fact that we watched *Lost in Space* could be seen as symbolic. Hadn't we been *lost in space* because of my mother's addiction? Weren't we found and grounded now that she was in recovery?

Imagine a young James Spader, rich and smug, doing a really slow clap

in a teal blazer. Why my plaudits for his Lacostic applause? Because such an interpretation ignores those un-playful burns on the carpet, remember? Not to mention the complicated ways that my own bad feelings about my mother's addiction had only then begun to settle into articulable shape in my mind.

(Note: The most recent articulation of that "shape" in prose has been three asterisks).

Needless to say, when we went to see *Lost in Space* what was happening in the movie was of less concern than the event itself. My stepfather was the kind of man who could be dropped off behind enemy lines in hostile territory and within three hours he will have made friends with at least ten people (eight of which perhaps unwilling; at least two, steadfast friends for life). He knew every seller of every kind of knickknack at every gazebo in Chapel Hill Mall. *How you doing today, Fred?* Or, *I got that watch you ordered.* Or, *Freddieman, my main man.* He'd position me by the shoulders, presenting me. Look, this is my son. *I've heard so much about you.* And they would have, too.

I was eager to get to the movie, even though, looking back, *Lost in Space* was a dud. It was less interesting than any of the better episodes from the original series. There's one about an intergalactic collector with live specimens of every kind of alien he encounters in his travels. He locks them up in big cages and suspends them in his lair from great heights like cocoons or go-go dancers, stalactites, or suicides.

Like a lot of new things, my parents agreed, this movie tried to be too much. I didn't often come around to see my mom, so I remember her being chatty. It didn't take much to get her dander up at other people, especially once the hard looks started coming her way for our talking. For once in my life, I didn't care what scene she started. It was a matinee anyway. Nothing more than grimaces followed as my mother carried on extensive conversations. She chatted about this or that person the film reminded her of at the clinic she went to, and the film wobbled along with her, much to the chagrin of our fellow theatergoers. Had this been a horror movie, Mom would've been entirely too absorbed for talking. Sober or not, horror was a different addiction, one she never kicked or tried to.

Toward the end she even got hooked on horror video games. *Silent Hill* was her mainline. She loved being tangled up in the *Hellraiser*-ed storylines of it, her eyes racooning again in the dulling shine of constant tv and the many hours she'd spend "controlling" her character. The protagonist was a young woman trapped in corridors that keep shifting from the ordinary, a bank or a school, to more hellish environs. Given Mom's obses-

sions, these were *canny* locales, more *heimlich* than *unheimlich* (i.e., German for “unhomelike” or Uncanny à la Freud’s translators). Her ontological area code may have been 666, but she was renting a real house in Akron near Fairlawn. And the place was in shambles—“under repair” as Mom used to say. Kitchen floorboards were missing, probably off to find the cabinet doors, wherever they had wandered off to. The stove certainly worked and my stepfather scrambled some eggs for us. He told me he never got around to fixing anything because he and my mother had been too absorbed in the game.

Silent Hill allowed my mother to experience horror as insularity. She was alone in the hallway flanked by darkness and a monster with legs growing out of its bulbous head. A moment ago, the girl my mother “controlled” was stuck in the bathroom of a hospital, running endlessly into a corner, unable to turn around.

My stepfather served his signature plate of pepper eggs as we watched the girl get stuck in a hallway. He could make toast and you’d swear it was the best thing ever. It was difficult eating that gorgeous meal at the table beside my mother playing her game. She had limitless patience for watching her character run in circles, discharging her pistol for no apparent reason until all the ammo is gone or walking into walls so long you discover and defy thresholds of patience you never knew you had.

It was terror o’clock all the time in the game and Satan’s minions wear sonic watches. The time they keep is the church bell tolling of Mom’s heroes the Cenobites, crossing over and coming on in. Here in the video game Mom could pretend that they had come for her at last.

Mom, you better run. Mom.

Something was coming down the hallway.

Mom!

Shhh—through her cigarette, the smoke of it ruining near perfect eggs in my mouth—I’m doing it! she hissed.

Creeping, lopsidedly, the monster gimped along the hallway toward the girl. Legs protruded from its mucous-covered head. The girl remained calm. Hell, she was nonplussed (anyone else would be plussed as hell). Not her. She knew of an arcane trick for outrunning demons, you see. Run at a wall in a hallway perpendicularly. Do it! Run at a wall at an impossible ninety-degree angle. Do it in the narrowest, darkest, most demon-infested hallway you can find. The macabre-er the better-er.

Mom! I shouted, spewing world-class scramble. Just move already!

No dice. We kept screaming: Hit the button! Get out of the way! She just kept on wall running nowhere fast.

I’m sure even the spirits and ghosts she said she could see in the house would’ve been pushing the planchette to spell M O V E were there a Ouija board set up to receive their ectoplasmic email. It was that aggravating. It was raise-the-dead aggravating, watching her character do the running man like a sitting duck, firing off her last bullets into pointless nonspace as Leg-Head moved in for the slow and snotty kill.

Do you play this all the time? I remember asking.

This is my game I love this game don’t bother me I am playing this game.

Anyone who grew up with smokers knows the hands-full mien she made to brush me off: cigarette screwed to one side, face squinting into or against the smoke. For the next year or so horror video games became my mother’s handful as well as her reprieve from the smoke and char of life.

Whereas before, Mom would shut herself away with her favorite VHS horror movies in her bedroom, a crypt of vampiric self-immolation, when gaming she would stay up in the sepulchral kitchen mashing buttons to wake the dead. She did it in a robe, her gaming uniform, which made her look more like *the* mummy rather than mine (da dum dum pshh). Even so, she had attained some measure of contentment at that point in her life—fleeting as it was, as such feelings always are, I suppose, from a distance.

From my distance, I like to imagine her robe a victory coat. And why not? The stupor her video game induced wasn’t the kind that would make her steal or worse. That was the robe of the specialist, for dreamers and all who dare the darkness and all the things that go bump inside it. She wore a robe that made us wonder if monsters are attracted to particular colors the way bees will always find that yellow shirt or the way bulls snort legendary antipathies for the color red through their snout rings before they charge. Maybe monsters have a trigger in twenty-year-old terry-cloth? Mom’s old robe, candy-striped white and maybe blue, or should we say, once white and now more of a tobacco white and blue? Brown and brownblue, the robe of bruises, a lost tarot. If you can imagine the robe so far, take it outside before you lose the image and run it over a couple of times with your car and then you’ll get the picture—and more, I wager. But will you have the meaning?

The root word meaning of the word *monster* is messenger. The monster is only a divine herald, as one interpretation goes. And if that’s true, and we all know that it is, then my mother must have been the monster’s monster. It was she who had a message for them. Like Ben from Romero’s classic, she knows all about them. She can handle him. And she’d tell it in

a whisper as she watched. She whispered it when the Cenobites would come and it's what she would say while playing her game.

Whenever the monsters appeared, Mom would say, *There you are. Here it comes.* The addendum to that phrase (implied but never uttered) was *Here I am. Come and get me.* Perhaps that linting robe was monster nip in blue. She sported it like a proud bullfighter on his last day, donning the scarlet as though pretending to be a ghost, sauntering in blind toward the charging horns like a child in gym under the parachute.

From a distance, and over the sound of snorting bulls, I know Mom was not so inept at the game as she let on. She *wanted* the monsters to get her and maybe she always had. What I will always remember—watching those movies with her. *Blacula* and *APSAlem's Lot*, *Roots* and *Rosemary's Baby*. From the dignity of *The Shining* to the farcical limits of the Chuckie movies, I watched all those movies with my mother and I watched her watch them at the same time. I was Chief Inspector of her undivided joy for the monster's revelation.

There you are. Here it comes.

And when they came for her I bet it was real Halloween. The Demon Boss's pins getting skin-scrapingly close. You can see him smiling through the staves beaming out from his face, a severe dawn. The jig is up. And Dr. Cenobite is down, showing off his moves. He does the Apollonic Hustle to that Billy Idol tune "Mony, Mony." His leather coattails spin as he and Mom twirl a few times for the judges. They've worked on this routine for a while and monster insiders say they'll finally stick the difficult landing.

The horrors were mother's little helpers after all. They danced to keep her distracted from herself and in the end none of the demons stuck the landing. Not even the littlest one from 1979 in his yellow sheet with fake blood from a white tube. Presto.