

Monsters (Florence, 1987)

They've heard about the man up in the hills. They've heard about how he comes down into the city. They've heard he attacks girls. The police can't catch him. They've heard worse things, too (*stalking, hunting, killing*), and they add to these horrors with their own inventions (*drowning, mutilating, burying*). They make up story after story until he is not a man any more, until he is a monster. They shriek and they scream and they tell each other stories about the Monster, because they would rather not know that he is a man.

The nightclub is on the other side of the river, and they have to run home if they want to get back to the *pensione* before the doors are locked at two a.m. They thought there would be taxis, but there are not. They will walk fast. There are six of them, plus the boys. They'll be fine.

They run along the river, leapfrogging from streetlight to streetlight, the yellow fog of one not quite reaching to the next. They are Canadian, and Swiss, and Jamaican, and French, but they all go to a school for Americans, in Rome, so they are Americans. They are foreign and not-foreign, because they live here, but not really.

They squeal as they run, arm in arm, into the next pool of light. The boys take their arms, too, but they are only friends, practice boys. Back at school, they flirt with and confide in one another, and the boys make them mix-tapes and they kiss at parties on the weekend. But on this school trip, they are moving away from one another, and at the disco tonight they realized that perhaps they have also been practice girls. The boys have no trouble chatting up beautiful Italian girls, girls who seem neither older nor younger than the Americans, but from another spectrum altogether. The Italian girls gaze at the American girls with disdain, or pity, or as if they don't even see them. The Americans don't mind: they are busy themselves, dancing with the Italian

men who flock to them simply because they are foreign.

(Where is he? Is he up in those hills, watching the lights of the city? Is he in the river, treading water silently in the darkness, listening to their voices echo off the marble embankment?)

During the day the piazza is full of people. Tables and umbrellas flow out onto the cobblestones, and groups of Scandinavians stand waiting for their next destination. There are kiosks selling postcards, and cheap plaster statues of David, and rude aprons. Everyone squints into the unbearable sun. But at night the kiosks close up, and the tourists go to their hotels, and the waiters bring in the tables and chairs and lock the shutters of the restaurants and go home. Then the piazza remembers the century when it was built, and the marble walls shine cool in the moonlight, and you can see the scalloped pattern in the cobblestones, wave upon wave washing across the empty space.

If a pair of tourists wander, arm-in-arm, into the empty piazza they will stop, disoriented by the beauty of it, wondering if they have slipped through time. It will be the thing they tell their friends back home about, the best experience of their trip.

But tonight there are no other tourists, there are just the six teenaged girls tripping across the piazza, giggling and lurching in their heels. High heels are the wrong things for the cobbles, but flat shoes are the wrong thing for the nightclub. They run and almost fall, and catch one another, laughing. They are not alone, they are together. The boys have dropped back somewhere, but the girls haven't noticed.

At first they think it's a moped behind them. The engine makes such a crappy little noise, but then there is the sound of voices, too, whooping and hollering: too many voices for a moped. The girls turn around just as the blue car picks up speed and comes right at them from behind.

The driver swerves to the right at the very last moment, pushing the girls closer together.

Assholes! one of them yells and this is a terrible mistake: she should have said *Stronzi!*

The brakes squeal, and the car u-turns back towards them, back towards that single English word, thrown across the piazza like a promise.

Americane! Americane! Would you like to suck my dick? The vowels are elongated, stretched. It's the sort of thing the girls make fun of at other times. The car speeds straight toward the group, horn honking, splitting them up like beads of mercury on a bathroom floor. There are five men in the car, leaning out the windows, yelling obscenities.

The girls freeze. They look at one another. Can they join up again? Which way will the driver turn next? Slowly, they begin to move together, but the car jolts to the left and traps the two standing closest to the portico. They try to back away, but then they panic and scramble up the marble stairs, the car almost on their heels. The driver honks like it's a joke, and pulls around hard, to the right, and charges at the other four girls who are watching from sixty feet away.

There are more of them, but the men are in a car. The men are laughing but the girls are not. They must stay together. They don't know which way to go.

The car comes straight at the four girls standing together. Two on the left run to join the girls in the portico. One girl remains frozen where she stands as the car circles around her. On the right, the last girl, closest to the corner of the street that leads to their *pensione*, has taken off her shoes and has started to run. The other girls watch her, see her shoes lying where she flung them on the cobblestones.

The men notice her too, and the car makes one last circle around the girl in the center, then swings out towards the running girl. It pulls in front of her, almost hitting her, and brakes hard. The right rear door opens, and someone turns around to face her.

Five girls stand in the portico, and stare across the piazza, at the back of their friend, standing in front of the open car door. She is looking down, as if the man in the back seat is showing her something.

They can hear her thoughts as if they were their own:

Don't get in the car. Don't let them get you into their car.

And then the oldest of the girls makes the next mistake. *Melissa!* she screams at her best friend.

Now the men in the car are chanting it too. *Melissa, Melissa, come and suck my dick.* They say *May-leesa*, they say *deeck*, but it's not funny. Melissa takes a step to her left, towards the group, but the car reverses and glides along beside her. Melissa stops. The car stops. She tries to run to the right, but the car follows her. The men are laughing, now, and Melissa is conscious of how silly she looks, playing chicken with a car.

The man in the back seat is still facing Melissa, and now his arms reach out towards her. Melissa moves again to the right, and again the car moves forwards, this time coming even closer, tightening the circle around her. The arms from the back seat can almost reach her.

Then, another cry across the piazza: *Ragazze!* The tone is petulant, but the voice is loud and unmistakably male, and it makes the men in the car look across the piazza, to the group of boys, the friends, who have now emerged from the narrow street leading to the river, the one the girls came up just a few minutes before. The car turns quickly, circles once around Melissa, and then rushes forwards across the piazza, horn honking, cheers flung out of the open windows.

The boys wave their arms and cheer back as the blue car passes them. They didn't see what happened.

Melissa runs over to her friends. She can't breathe, and her friends circle around her, and

then her best friend starts to laugh, and Melissa laughs too, and the boys come over and try to tease them about the guy in the car but they stay circled and laughing, and the girls pick up Melissa's shoes from the middle of the piazza and laugh all the way back to the *pensione*, and the old man who has to let them in because they've locked the door calls them *maleducate*.

The boys don't understand why the girls don't talk to them on the way back to the *pensione*, why they go straight to bed without saying goodnight. The girls just lock themselves into their room and stay up for another hour, drinking vodka and saying *suck my deeck* to each other and laughing. When they finally fall asleep, no one bothers to turn off the lights, and the little window shines all night over the dark streets of Florence.

Up in the hills, and in the river, and in the trees, and in the piazzas and in the rooms of the *pensione*, the Monster watches the girls, and waits for the next time.

