

Editor's note: this essay was originally written for an anthology of essays by horror fans. The anthology was cancelled and the essay was never published. It is reproduced here with the author's permission.

TRIGGER WARNING: for discussions of child sexual abuse; bullying.

THEN, MIDIAN: THE POWER OF GOING WHERE THE MONSTERS ARE

by Seanan McGuire

I have always been a Halloween Girl.

I tell people different things were my first fandom, depending on the context—it's usually *Doctor Who* when I'm talking about television, and *My Little Pony* when I'm talking about really investing in a world in that uniquely all-consuming fannish way—and I'm always telling the truth, but the reality is that my first fandom was the month of October. It was the mask that let you be a monster for a little while, and the strangers who opened their doors with smiles on their faces and bowls of candy in their hands. It was monster movies and Halloween specials and *The Munsters* on every channel that wasn't clogged with reruns of *The Addams Family*. It was drawing up maps of the neighborhood and plotting the best way to bring home the biggest trick or treat haul, including notes about shortcuts and observations about which neighbors tended to stay up late on non-Halloween nights (indicating the possibility that they would also stay up late on Halloween, allowing me to visit them *twice*). It was home.

One of the first clear memories I have is sitting on my uncle's knee while he watched a movie on our Betamax. Some people in funny spacesuits were walking into a big warehouse full of leather flowers. One of those leather flowers started to bloom...and my mom rushed into the room, shouting at my Uncle Mike for letting her four year old watch *Alien*. On such moments

are the foundations of a life constructed. I learned early and well that monsters could be defeated, if you were smart, if you paid attention, if you followed the rules, and if you never dropped your guard.

This knowledge saved my life.

When I was still very young—older than that day in the living room with Uncle Mike, when monsters were just stories, and not things that could ever touch me—my mother married a man who was, in some ways, much more interested in me than he was in her. His interest only increased after he had children of his own, making me surplus to requirements in all ways but one. I learned about monsters. I learned that the single biggest lie of the monster movies was their simplicity: you could always identify the werewolf, the vampire, the fishman, the Blob. They were so *obvious*. My stepfather, and men like him...they weren't. They looked just like everybody else. They were invisible.

But they could be defeated. I don't think I would have known that without horror movies. Horror movies taught me that every werewolf had its wolfsbane, and every vampire had its stake. When I had the chance to fight back, I took it. My stepfather went to jail for a very long time for what he did. The trial wasn't easy. Whenever I flagged, whenever I wanted to give up, I thought about the girls in my movies. The girls who fought back, no matter what was happening, because the monsters were real, and because those girls had to *win*.

It's difficult to talk about what came next. Not that the rest of this was easy—just that there's something intrinsically hard about saying "I was broken." But I was. I was very broken, for a very long time, in ways I didn't really know how to recognize, because I was too young to know what I had looked like back in the days when I was whole. More than ever, I burrowed

into the comforting simplicity of horror movies, where good might not always win, but evil was always straightforward and easy to see.

Two movies came into my life about this time, and between the two of them, they did a lot to convince me that I could find safety, security, and peace among the undead. One was made for television, obscure even when it was new: *The Midnight Hour*. The other was shown in theaters, although I don't think I saw it there: *Night of the Comet*.

The Midnight Hour is about a group of teenagers who decide that reading an ancient scroll aloud in a graveyard at midnight on Halloween is a spiffy plan, and one that they should put into action immediately. This would be a bad idea anywhere, but when the person actually reading the scroll is the descendant of the infamous town witch, well...here, have a portal to Hell. Lots of bad stuff comes through said portal, there's a dance routine (no, seriously), and everything is cleaned up by morning, because that's the way of made-for-TV movies. Pretty standard stuff. But there was a character in this movie who changed my life.

Her name was Sandy. She was a good guy. She was the one who eventually broke the curse on the town, and put everything right by telling our hero, Phil, what he needed to do to save the day. She did that despite knowing that she would die in the process—or die again, anyway. Sandy was a hitchhiking ghost, made material by the curse. She was the most basic form of the undead, the revenant, and I fell in love instantly. Here was a girl who had already lost everything, already lost her *life*, and she was still willing to stand up against the monsters when she felt like it was the right thing to do. She was a monster, but she wasn't a *bad person*. You didn't have to be like everyone around you to be good. You could be a monster, and that was okay too. For a little girl who was being told that betraying her father figure was bad and wrong, and who felt the need to do it anyway, this was a hugely important lesson to learn.

(As a slightly less serious aside, for years I thought that I had been so desperate for this hugely important lesson that I had made the movie up. See, it was on television the Halloween that I was stuck home with a really bad fever. I had been watching movies on the couch, slipping in and out of consciousness the way sick kids do, and there had been no one in the house with me to witness the glory of *The Midnight Hour*. I didn't have many friends at school, and the ones I did have weren't allowed to watch monster movies the way I was. I spent over a decade describing this movie to people, not remembering the title—which would have made things too easy—and getting blank looks in return. When I found it on DVD, I literally broke down crying in the middle of the mall. It was *real*. The lesson I had needed so much was *real*.)

Night of the Comet was a lot more straightforward in some ways. It was a blatant attempt to cash in on the excitement generated by the return of Haley's Comet. What if...the comet came back to Earth and had some sort of horrible, unforeseen effect on everyone on the planet? What if...it wasn't the *only* comet pulling that sort of long trip around our solar system? What if...one of those long-lost comets had been responsible for the death of the dinosaurs, and was now on its way back to destroy mankind? And what if...the only survivors of the comet's deadly approach were people who coincidentally happened to have been completely encased in metal while it passed overhead, and were now lost in a world of weird red dust and half-eroded zombie people? Also, what if there was a huge shopping montage in the middle because we must never forget that the world ended during the height of human civilization, the 1980s?

So yeah, that happened. Two of the survivors—our main characters and unquestioned heroes—were Regina, a tough-talking, gun-toting, jean jacket-wearing Final Girl with hair big enough to need an area code and the attitude to match, and her little sister Sam. Sam, who had fluffy blonde hair and big blue eyes and complained vociferously when she wasn't given a big

enough gun. Sam, who wore her cheerleading uniform for a good chunk of the movie, because dammit, she liked her uniform. Sam, who didn't conform to either of the roles horror movies had previously told me girls were allowed to play. I'd seen Regina and girls like her before—they were awesome, they were heroes, but they always fit a certain “my heroism comes at the expense of my femininity, at least until the monster is defeated and some handsome man sweeps me off my feet” mold. Even Regina herself fit it, up to a point. But Sam?

Sam was a modern day Marilyn Munster, happy in herself, secure in the fact that cheerleaders can carry automatic weapons if they want to, and ready to kick everyone's asses if that was what it took for her to survive the end of the world. She was the second woman to join my personal pantheon. Sandy taught me that being a monster was okay. Sam taught me that being *yourself* was okay, too. Between the two of them, I was finally approaching something that felt a lot like safety. It felt a lot like coming home. And it was all because of monster movies, which most people don't view as the thing that can lead a lost little girl out of the woods.

It wasn't just movies, though, and the third person who cemented my lifelong genre wasn't on film when I first met her, although she would find her way there eventually. Her name was Lori. She showed me the way home.

It's time for another brief digression, if only so you can understand where Lori and I met. My mother was a reader, in the sense that she liked books. I was a bibliophile. I *breathed* books. From the time I understood what books were, it was rare to find me without a book in my hand or a magazine rolled up and jammed into my pocket. Other kids spent Saturdays playing dodgeball; I spent them at library book sales and building what would become a lifelong friendship with the man who owned my local comic book store. My mother did her best to filter my reading material, but she had two little girls who were younger than I was (six years and

seven years younger, to be precise), and I was already reading at an adult level, and at a certain point and through no fault of her own, she just gave up. Books gave me comfort when very little else did. If I wanted to read, that was fine by her.

So I read. I read Lovecraft, and Shelley, and Poe. I read Knight and Kojé and King. I read Barker—and you haven't seen humor until you've seen a third grade teacher trying to take a copy of *Books of Blood* away from a little girl who is staunchly insisting that she has her mother's permission to learn about the Cenobites. (This is also why I am in favor of letting kids read whatever they want. I didn't recognize the sexual aspects of much of what I was reading until I re-read those same works as a teenager. I just skipped the parts I wasn't ready for, and went straight for Pumpkinhead pulling some dude's lip over his entire head like it was a hat. You know, good, healthy material for growing minds.) It was Clive Barker who introduced me to my third idol, and to the shape of home, even if he couldn't tell me how to get there. It was in a novella called "Cabal," later adapted into a movie called *Nightbreed*.

My third idol's name was Lori. Home's name was Midian.

Midian, the city of monsters. Midian, the necropolis, land of the dead. Midian, home of the *Nightbreed*, where once you arrived, they had to let you stay. Midian became my Narnia, my Oz, my road into the night that ended somewhere beautiful. Midian was the place where my monstrosity was allowed. I knew I was a monster. I hadn't just had sexual congress with my father figure, which all the kids at school were quick to point out as proof that I was a creature beyond redemption (there is no cruelty like the cruelty of children), but I had sent him to prison for my sins. It didn't matter that I was nine years old during the final stages of his trial. All the blame was mine, because that's how the world *works* when you're a damaged little girl desperately looking for a way to make the world make sense again.

Then, Midian. A place for people like the people I thought I was. Sandy told me it was okay to be a monster, and Sam told me it was okay to be myself, and Lori told me that monsters deserved to be loved too. That no matter what you had done, you deserved to be loved too. You deserved your place in the world, even if that place was in a graveyard, among the living, loving dead.

I could go on for hours about the examples of strong, positive, redemptive women that I found in horror, almost inevitably surrounded by corpses—ones that they had either made or shared a kinship with—but I don't really think I need to. Everyone knows the great goddesses of our genre, Morticia, Elvira, and Marilyn, and I have worshiped at their altars: I have made my sacrifices to their names, because I am a good girl, and I know the Great Pumpkin loves me. I just found my peace in other icons, in Sandy and Sam and Lori, in the ones who showed me how, when I was so lost I thought I would die, to find my own way home.

The power of horror is in the way it takes the barriers away—even the barrier of our own humanity—and shows us what's hidden underneath our skins. Sometimes men can be monsters. And sometimes monsters can be frightened little girls who need to be told, one piece at a time, that it's all right; that they're forgiven; that they're allowed to come home.

Everyone is allowed to come home.