

On Being a “Monster”

By Katlynn Leon

Across the five or six decades I’ve lived in Florida, my favorite moment each year has stayed the same: the first rain of summer. A late afternoon thunderstorm. Wind whipping through the trees, rain pouring down, and the smell of humid Earth. Each year, I step outside and let the water rush over me. As the fat water droplets trickle down my scalp and spine, I imagine being cleansed of all my sins. It never really works, but the feeling of a new beginning is incomparable.

This year, I did not get to experience that cleansing in solitude. The thunderstorm came on with no warning. The clouds crowded over the full moon. Then, the sky cracked open. Lightning flashes, followed by Earth shaking thunderclaps, and enough rain to overflow every body of water in town. It started moments after Arya sat in my passenger seat. Maybe, it was a sign.

Arya, despite being a sophomore, managed to find a reason to stay on campus during the summer. Usually, the town empties at the first sign of heat. All of the college students flee when classes end and the temperature starts creeping up into the mid-90s. Arya didn’t seem to mind. She felt it was a fair exchange for the opportunity to do research on bats.

From inside my blue Subaru, the rain seemed especially violent. The water was pounding on the windshield so hard my wipers could barely keep up. The moss hanging off the tree I’m parked under, dropped in clumps on my car every time the wind picked up. The lightning and thunder fell into an expected rhythm, becoming background noise. I recognized the pattern. The first downpour of summer. Soon, the streets would flood and it’d be impossible to get back to campus.

It took ten minutes to drive to ‘our spot’ and it had already been ten more minutes of meaningless small talk. My leg bobbed up and down, quicker with each raindrop. Still, Arya had yet to share why it was so important we see each other today. I squeezed the steering wheel to restrain myself from swinging the door open and indulging in the warm rain against my cold skin.

Arya reached for my hand and brought it to her lap. Her fingers were warm and her skin soft. She spun the rings on my finger ‘round and ‘round. “I love your rings.” She pulled my hand to her face, gently kissing each one. With each kiss, she’d look up at me with her brown eyes blown wide.

I nodded, lost in my head and enraptured by her touch. My leg stilled. Despite my better instincts, I caught her chin in my hand and drew her face close to mine. She tasted, as she always did, like cherry chapstick. The familiarity and the sound of the rain made me believe for just a second that I could promise her a new beginning with me. It could be different this time.

She pulled away first, left me leaning forward, lips parted, waiting for more.

“How many nights in a row is this?” Arya asked, pulling on her bottom lip.

There it is, the reason we had to meet today. She wants to have the *what are we* conversation. I mumbled something noncommittal and tried to kiss her again, in hopes she’d drop it.

“No.” She held a finger in front of her lips. “Answer me, how many nights in a row do you think this is?” The corners of her mouth lifted with a teasing smile.

“Fifteen?” It felt like a substantial enough answer to stop her from worrying I didn’t care, but not large enough to justify defining the relationship.

She leaned back into her seat, tucking herself in the farthest corner from me. Her back was pressed against the passenger door and she brought her knees up to her chest. Her guards were up. “It’s been thirty days.” The four words came out slowly with perfect enunciation.

I knew we’d been seeing each other a lot lately, but I guess it never struck me how long. A whole month. It’s her fault, though. She should’ve been on a plane to Portland, forgetting my name, two weeks ago.

She continued, “and did you know it’s been three months, today, since we started seeing each other?”

Through the howling wind, I listened to her heartbeat grow louder and frenzied. I didn’t know what to say. She knows we can’t be together, so why even bother bringing it up.

She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. “Are you going to say anything at all?” She gnawed so hard on her lip, it split open and the stench of blood filled the car.

My fangs pricked my own lip in response. “I don’t know what you want me to say, we can’t be together, you know that.”

“People do it all the time.” Her words were nearly drowned out by the pounding rain and her pounding heart.

I took a long, deep breath. I chose my words wisely, “It’s still illegal.” I tried to be practical, stay grounded, remain in control of my emotions. I know I’m only one accident away from hurting her, so I tried my best not to fall into the trap.

She licked the blood from her bottom lip and let her tongue slip out her mouth, only for a moment. It was enough for a rushing wave of hot desire to pass over me. She leaned over the center console, looked me dead in the eye and said, “Maybe, you should’ve considered the laws before luring me in.”

The vein in her neck pulsed, teasing me. I returned my hands to the steering wheel and watched the wipers slide the moss around. I traced the pattern with my eyes and pushed out all the thoughts blaming her for all of this. She should’ve never stayed on campus for the summer. She should’ve never flirted with me at that party. And she should’ve never started this conversation, knowing where it would end.

“Don’t you want to be with me?” Her voice cracked, as she emphasized each word.

“I love spending time with you, Arya, but you know that we can’t be together.” I spoke with my jaw clenched, even though it felt like my mouth was too small for all my teeth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her adjust herself to sit upright. “I’m sure you know being a lesbian was illegal for many, many years. That was plain bigotry. What makes this any different?” Her whole face lit up, like she thought she was about to win the argument.

“There are real concerns about vampire/human relations.”

“Like what?” She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms, like a child saying *I told you so*.

“The power imbalance, seeing that I’m centuries older than you and much stronger than any human.” A lightning strike, too close for comfort, lit up the sky.

“Okay.” She jumped when the thunder clapped, her heart skipped a beat. “But there isn’t a power imbalance between us. You don’t even really use your vampirism for anything. When

was the last time you drank human blood? Was it even in this century?" She rattled on about those little things that brought her comfort, like a practiced list of reasons I couldn't be monster.

"I have my substitutes, but—"

She cut me off. "That's what I mean, you're not like other vampires."

Of course she thought that, but she didn't know that for sure. She just wanted to feel safe with me. The three months we've spent together is a small fraction of the long life I've lived.

"You don't really know that, Arya." I've hurt people I loved before and I wasn't going to do it again. "Think about it, do you even know me that well at all?"

I could smell the anxiety those words cut into her. "I only know what you've been willing to share."

"And, I've shared a lot with you. There's just a lot more to share when you've been alive over a century." I reached out to touch her, grab her hand or something to comfort her, but thought again and rested my hand on the center console.

She muttered something about "barely being alive a century." I didn't entertain it.

Silence stretched between us. The only sounds were from the rain, the wind, and the soft music on the radio. Her hand found its place next to mine. Our wrists touched. Then, our pinkies. Slow with hesitation, she linked her pinky over mine. We shared the same breath.

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For a moment, it felt like we were the same. Her dark hair hung over her shoulders. Her olive skin radiant in the dark. My body yearned to give into us. My mind whirled with whispers. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* It drowned out everything else. Then, the words echoed in my head, fell out of my lips, "I love you," said in a barely audible whisper.

"I love you, too." She whispered back.

I jumped across the center console to hold her face with delicate hands. I was reaching out, scared of the weight of the words and the crushing reality that we would never be the same. I let my lips hover over hers, asking permission, until she closed the gap. As always, kissing her felt like home.

When she pulled away, too soon, I knew I lost my home.

Still, my lips lingered close. "Babe, please."

It was pathetic.

It took me longer than I care to admit to notice it, but her face was wet with tears. She kept up this twisted smile, but she had been crying. Crying, while kissing me. The realization sent me reeling back into the confines of the driver's seat. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Her heart thundered against her ribs. "I just don't understand how you love me if you won't be my girlfriend." She sounded weak, but I knew her, the words were intentional.

"That's not fair." The long list of reasons this could never work rolled through my mind. Flashes of cold bodies, long nights, and blood-soaked sheets. I refused to put her through any of it.

"Why? People do this all the time!" She nearly yelled at me in her frustration.

"That doesn't matter, I told you *I can't*" The stress of fighting with her was wearing me down, I could taste copper at the back of my throat, the ball of tears threatening escape.

"But, that's all you've said, Camila. You give me no context, no explanation, just that you don't want to." Even her words seemed wet from the tears, let out between gasping breaths.

"I want to be with you, but I've done this before and I love you too much to risk hurting you." It's more than I had ever told any human at the time. I don't like being seen as a monster. I don't want to be a monster. I only drink bottled and animal blood. I don't want to hurt anyone.

"If you don't want to hurt me, you won't." She held my hand against her chest, the rhythm of her heart playing against my skin.

"Accidents happen." It ran through my mind in flashes. Half-awake, digging my fangs into her. Sheets dyed red with blood. Tearing my wrist, feeding her, turning her. The yelling that I've turned her into a monster.

"How about this: you explain to me about this accident you're scared of and then, with all the information, I decide if I'm willing to risk it." She wiped away the tears on her face.

"But," I tried to come up with a defense, a reason I knew better, but she cut me off before I could get there.

"I am an adult, I can make decisions about my own safety." With the rain trickling down the glass behind her and the dedicated look in her eye, she could've been on an album cover.

I didn't know how to start explaining myself. It's a long story. "The only human I've ever been with, I turned into a vampire." A slightly misleading headline, but it worked.

"Okay, why?" Arya leaned closer to me.

"Well, uh, she startled me and I was a young vampire, a very young vampire, less than a year." I swallowed down the sticky feeling behind my tonsils. "So, on instinct I attacked. I latched on to her neck and drank her dry."

I paused, waiting for the look of horror to contort Arya's features, but it never came. Instead, she looked curious, as if she was trying to solve a puzzle. "How did she startle you?"

My mouth, throat, all of it felt dryer than ever. I was choking on air. The flashes of torn clothes, her hovering over me, screaming no. It felt impossible to speak. I took a long breath and tried a different angle. "Well, this girl and I were friends before I was turned. She was my roommate and was just one of those human things I couldn't let go of. Every night, we'd stay up talking and when I told her I was a vampire, nothing really changed. We got closer if anything."

The rain let up and the wipers slowed down. Even as I looked out the window, I could feel Arya searching my every expression for answers. I don't know why I was opening up to her. I knew better than to be with a human again. Humans genuinely believe they're incapable of being monsters, so I swore I'd never turn anyone again.

"Were you dating this girl?" Arya asked, when my silence stretched on for too long.

"At the time, being a lesbian wasn't really a thing talked about. So, we enjoyed each other's company."

"Did you kiss her? Do things?" I couldn't make out if it was jealousy, curiosity, or a combination of both.

"At this point in our *friendship*, we only kissed." I continued, without thinking. "So, when I woke up in my bed with her hand inside me, it startled me."

The look that glazed over Arya's face was unreadable. It looked like pity and disgust and fear. Then, she took my chin in my her hands, looked me in the eyes, and apologized. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"Don't do that. "Don't feel bad for me. I literally killed her, then turned her into a monster." I twisted around to face out the driver's window. "I'm the monster, I'm the bad guy."

Arya's fingers worked circles on my back. "When you say you woke up with her hands there, were you drunk? Or, I guess you actually had to be sleeping, since vampires don't get drunk? I don't know what I'm saying." She rambled in a soft voice.

"Vampires don't get drunk from drinking alcohol, but we'll feel the affects of the blood we drink. That night, there was a huge party on campus, so the person I fed from he could've been drunk or drugs. Honestly, I don't know it's all a blur."

"You were just defending yourself, Camila. If you thought I'd be scared of you, for defending of yourself." She laughed at herself, like I was being overdramatic or something.

My face warmed under the stream of red tears dripping down my cheeks. "I don't want to risk hurting you like that, you shouldn't be with someone who is capable of killing the person they love."

"But, she put you in that position." Her hands had worked their way up my back to the curve where my neck and shoulders meet.

"Don't blame her, that's not fair!" I'll admit that I yelled. I shrugged her hand off my shoulder and tried to retreat into myself.

The rain started up again, coming at all sorts of angles, filling the silence. I was lost in my head with the blood-soaked sheets and a highlight reel of five-year long arguments with my only fledgling.

"Camila," Arya's gentle voice rocked me into the present. "I think I solved our problem."

"What?" I turned to her and I'm sure I looked crazy, my face stained with blood tears. "I just explained why we can't be together. I don't trust myself."

"What if you don't have to worry about trusting yourself?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I want you to turn me." Arya bared her neck right in front of me. Her jugular vein throbbed under the skin.

"No, I won't make you a monster." I tilted my chin up, squeezed my eyes shut, anything to dampen the temptation.

"See, I don't think vampires are monsters. I want this and then we could be together, forever." She held her neck closer to my face.

I pushed her away from me. “Being turned into a vampire is a traumatic act, I don’t want to inflict that onto you. It’ll change us.”

“I want this. I’m consenting to it.” She smelled like sweaty desperation, her humid skin so close to my face.

I shook my head. “Can we just go back to the way things were before today?”

She retracted immediately, crossing her arms in the passenger seat. “Either we leave this car in a relationship or it’s over.”

“I won’t date a human.”

“And you won’t turn me either.”

“Yeah, but I love you—”

“I’m sorry.” I still don’t know if she meant it or if it was just a soft rejection.

The silence that followed, weighed down my Subaru. The rain finally gave up, fat drops splattered against the windshield dripping off the trees. Neither one of us dared to make eye contact. It’s like we both knew that it was really over. It didn’t matter that I bared my soul to her or that she’s the only person I’ve bared my soul to. She didn’t care about anything beyond what she wanted from me.

Once the car reached suffocating levels of humidity and the playlist ran out of songs, Arya said, “Maybe you should get a therapist or something.”

My jaw hung open. Was that all she had to say? *I’m sorry, you should be in therapy.*

She continued with more confidence, “I think it would just help you figure out how to commit to someone and learn to compromise. You know, what people do in adult relationships.”

“I can handle an *adult relationship*. If I wanted to be in one, I would.”

“Right...” She sighed. “Camila, just take me home. I’m done.”

I shifted the car into drive and prayed the streets wouldn’t be completely underwater.