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Monsters

(An Essay by Cody Fricke)

I was only five-years old when I was introduced to my first horror movie. I had just finished getting dressed for tee-ball practice and was on my way out of the house when I noticed that my parents had not turned off the television. Five-year-old Cody, much like present day Cody, was disinterested in the sport of tee-ball, so I decided to linger around the TV rather than rush towards inevitable discontentment. As fate would have it, Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was playing, and I witnessed the scene where Johnny Depp is consumed by his mattress and regurgitated as a geyser of blood. I remember standing inches away from the screen, completely fascinated with what I was watching. Although I was only able to catch a few minutes of the film due to my parents' impatience, what I witnessed in that short time left me instantly hooked. I was too young to realize the significance, but this was the beginning of an enduring passion for horror, a passion that would go on to define my adolescence as well as my future.

What I remember most vividly of my elementary school experience are feelings of intense alienation and isolation. Growing up, I was consistently bullied for one reason or another. On one given day, I might be picked on because of the shape of my ears; on another, it might be because of my name, or my glasses, or any number of other aspects of myself of which I had no control. I was taught what it means to be a pariah before I even learned basic mathematics. It goes without saying that this bullying had a profound effect on my interests, which brings me to the one aspect of elementary school that I enjoyed the most, the event which would periodically allow me to escape from the monotonous misery of my elementary education: the Scholastic Book Fair. While most of my classmates would be excited over the opportunity to miss class, I would look forward to browsing through their ever-expanding selection of books. The true significance of these book fairs as they

pertain to me, however, is that they introduced me to one series in particular, a series that appealed to me in much the same way that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* appealed to me a few years prior: R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps*. With this series, I was able to foster my passion for horror in a way that was considered acceptable for children my age. These stories were scary and exciting; monotony was replaced with monsters. I realized at a young age that I was unsatisfied and unhappy, and that I would much rather face down a monster than my own reflection.

By the time I became a teenager, I was a full-blown horror junkie. I wasn't content with limiting my passion to just literature and cinema; horror seemed to encompass my entire life. While most of my peers turned to the country station for their music, I was pirating Misfits albums. Rather than keep up with the latest television shows, I was watching reruns of *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Twilight Zone*. My wardrobe consisted almost entirely of black jeans, Evil Dead t-shirts, and black, high-top Converse; my style was in stark contrast to my Guy Harvey, Sperry wearing classmates. By this point, I had truly begun to embrace the alienation which I first felt as a child. I took pride in being a misfit. After all, it's not like Freddy Krueger was invited to parties. You didn't see Jason having lunch with his peers. Horror taught me that I did not need to be universally loved and adored to have an exciting, fulfilling existence. For a brief moment, I was actually at peace with the man in the mirror. I was comfortable. In retrospect, I consider this to be the calm before the storm. Little did I know that my recently acquired contentment would soon be shattered by a force more violent and destructive than any movie monster I knew, aside from perhaps Godzilla.

Needless to say, Hurricane Katrina was a drastic turning point in my life. Suddenly, the comfortable existence I took for granted was no more, and horror was no longer

confined behind a television screen or within the pages of a book. It was ever-present and all-consuming. My town of Bay Saint Louis was no longer the vibrant, quirky little town I once knew and resented; it looked more like a post-apocalyptic wasteland from a George A. Romero film. I was lucky enough to avoid the horror of being in town as the monstrous Katrina made landfall, but upon riding into town and seeing the destruction firsthand, I was paralyzed with fear. The town was in ruins, and so were our lives, all because of this beast of a storm. I no longer had the comfort of escaping reality through the means of which I was accustomed. Katrina had torn my town to shreds, and along with it, any means of escape. There was simply no time or place to sit down and watch a movie, or read a book, or do anything pleasurable for that matter. After a few months of absolute suffering, things settled down a bit, and I was able to return to school. I even found the time to start and finish Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* series, as well as her *Lives of the Mayfair Witches* series, which I will always remember as the one positive from that awful time. These stories reminded me of life before the hurricane, a simpler time, a time which I had clearly taken for granted. I found comfort in Rice's descriptions of New Orleans, descriptions that were made prior to its decimation at the hands of a monster far more real than the vampires of her creation. Had it not been for these books, I'm not sure I would have survived the weeks and months immediately following the storm, which helped cultivate a deep, unrivaled appreciation for Rice and her works. Despite how much I enjoyed and appreciated the escapes from reality that her stories provided, it was unfortunately too late; I felt the weight of this new, post-Katrina reality warranted more powerful escapes than the pleasure of Rice's writing could provide. I began to lose interest in not only horror, but everything I once took pleasure in. I was no longer satisfied with merely being a horror junkie; I needed a new fix. It was this mindset that would go on to define nearly the next decade of my life. I did not know it at the time, but I was about to be introduced to a world far more terrifying than anything I thought

possible, despite my early education in horror: the world of addiction.

My battle with addiction over nearly ten years of my life following Hurricane Katrina would make for a brutally effective horror movie in and of itself. Shortly after the storm, I had a surgery for which I was prescribed hydrocodone. I was hooked immediately. This was exactly the kind of escape for which I had so desperately been searching for. However, I quickly realized that coming back to reality was far more difficult than simply closing a book or pausing a movie. It escalated to the point where I was unable to stop. I had forgotten how to live without painkillers. What began as an innocent habit suddenly became my entire reason for living. Unbearably miserable in the throes of my addiction, but terrified of the alternative, I fed it until it grew into something truly monstrous; my addiction had evolved into a putrid, writhing behemoth of my own creation, a beast that fed on my darkest doubts and fears. I was powerless in the presence of Addiction. There were times when it appeared as though I had finally conquered the beast, but much like the horror icons of my youth, it just kept coming back. Sometimes it would play dead for days, even weeks, but it would undoubtedly return, each time more powerful than before. By the end of our last battle, the audience had long since grown weary of our endless back-and-forth. Today, I am free from the beast, and although I have not felt its presence in quite some time, I know better than to dare pronounce it dead.

For the first time since Hurricane Katrina, I have been able to sit down and watch the horror movies that meant so much to me in my youth. I now have someone to share these experiences with, enabling me to enjoy them without the associations of loneliness and alienation. In fact, at the end of our most recent horror binge, I realized that I have never enjoyed these films like I now find myself enjoying them.

Today, I am no longer desperate for the escape from reality that horror used to provide, and this realization has been overwhelmingly cathartic. Speaking of catharsis, recently I was able to meet and briefly speak with the woman who authored my only reprieves from the real-life horror of my immediate post-Katrina life: Anne Rice. She was hosting a book signing in New Orleans for her newest addition to *The Vampire Chronicles*, and after standing in line for hours, it was finally my turn to meet the Queen of the Damned herself. With tears welled in my eyes, I nervously approached her with the books I brought to be signed: *Memnoch the Devil* and *Lasher*, my favorite books from both of her series that I read in the months immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Despite my crippling fear of dismissal, I managed to tell her how much her books comforted me following the storm, and that her latest novel could not have come at a better time in my life. She paused from signing my books, looked me in the eyes with a smile on her face, thanked me, and said how much it means to hear that she could help get me through such a difficult time in my life. I was in tears. After autographing a copy of her new book for me, she wished me the best of luck in my future, and thanked me again for my comments on her writing. This was it. This was the catharsis that I never realized I wanted. It was at this moment I realized that the monsters that had haunted me for so long, the isolation, the storm, the addiction... they were finally behind me. All they could do now was provide me with much needed perspective, reminding me of times long since passed and lessons long since learned. The past was where it belonged, and the future never seemed brighter. Tonight, I will find myself lost in Anne Rice's latest horror story, not to escape reality, but simply to enjoy the fiction. The horror that grew out of control and nearly consumed me has been vanquished. Tonight, I read for pleasure.