

Frankenstein's Monster

Eleonora Zanetti

Abstract: The misery of not being seen and recognized for who we are makes us blindly grope in the dark. Despite being lost in a confusing forest full of her family's hovering shadows, Eleonora Zanetti will manage to get back to her main road and find some light. Frankenstein's monsters are shaped by those who create them, but they will eventually go beyond their creators' intentions. Eleonora's story tells of the struggle to find purpose and harmony in her student identity, betraying those who had composed a monster made of their own deceased aspirations.

I remember the day of my degree: it was a grey and rainy day in December. I was alone at home, remotely connected in a small room with my dog next door. I hadn't taken the highest grade I was aiming for and I was also quite hurt, but at the same time the thought of having achieved something despite everything was cheering me up. It had been a lonely but compelling journey. Somehow, it felt less like an end than a new start. The greyness of the sky, the solitude of the remote connection, and the presence of the dog matched my mood: everything had something calm and melancholic. This feeling suddenly breaks with the sound of the bell—it's my mother. As soon as she enters the house, she asks me where I have just graduated from and goes on to question me if the degree is actually a real one. I don't know what else she might have thought it was, but I remember feeling the coldness of that comment breaking the grey but calm balance that had accompanied me that morning.

A few hours later, my father's call arrives: he congratulates, and hopes that now that I have finished the first degree I will return with my feet on the ground, in factual reality, without going to pursue all my "childhood desires of omnipotence," as he calls them. The master's degree would only be proof of my inability to know how to concretize what I have learned and to decide what to do in life.

The episode makes me think of Frankenstein, a very fascinating character for me as a child: a creature that was shaped by those who had brought it into the world according to their canons. A creature that was the result of an ambitious, unfree love. I believe that the imagery that evokes this character is worth a thousand words to describe my experience as a first-gen student: I grew up feeling like I had a personality made of others' dead pieces, so contradictory that did not harmonize well with each other and created a rigid and opaque armour, under which the germ of life was covered. My feelings and initiatives with respect to the university world were difficult to manage: I have always been thirsty for curiosity, but this was tolerated as long as the source to drink from was my own family. Now, I feel the need to make a note: when I refer to the behaviour of "my parents," I am referring to a couple whose relationship was complicated; my father always tried to humiliate and silence any idea and intellectual aspiration of my mother. She therefore acted towards the aspirations of her children in the same way, as a result of a toxic relationship. I am more than happy to say that now things have changed for her too—she's even attending the university of the third age. Well, anyway, let's take a step back. If I tried to quote, or listen to other voices independently, they were dismantled by references to squalid—and manufactured—episodes of my parents' personal lives. Everything had to pass through the filter of their intellect; if I had different ideas . . . well, I was too stupid to fully understand an issue; or I was reading the wrong author—that one there, who was so much an intellectual but in the end had deplorable behaviours in private life. If they were women, they were all "whores," or just automatons of their

masters; if they were men, they enjoyed whores' company or were homosexuals—yes, even homosexuality was seen by my parents as a dangerous perversion that affected the purity of thought (sigh!). In hindsight, these were authors that my parents could not understand and in comparison to which felt inadequate; the solution was therefore to defame and belittle them upon hateful assumptions before the eyes of a curious and sensitive daughter so that they could not exert an influence on her, whispering words of freedom in her ear.

My father boasted of his huge library of thousands of books out of which, as he had done, I would have to study independently without being diverted from university education, since “most professors do not understand shit.” In the meantime, I had to prove that I was down to earth, doing practical but not degrading jobs for “the reputation of a young lady.” Fortunately, some seed of disobedience under that monster armour had remained within me, and therefore, starting to work, I also began to save some money to be able to pay the university fees and give the exams as a non-attending student. Even in the job searching, for a long time I never dared to aim for something that could satisfy me too much; I felt like I deserved just the minimal thing that suited my abilities because I saw it as a betrayal, a subterfuge towards the creators of my monster. Fortunately, once I started studying as a non-attending student, I had the wise foresight to keep what I was studying to myself. I kept it as a hidden treasure that I did not want to be attacked by acidic, envious, and gruesome comments that would ruin my new adventure.

It was all ambiguous. My parents are two professionals. For years they bragged that they went to university and could not finish it for the most varied causes—once a quarrel with a professor when only one exam was left, another time to not miss a job opportunity, another time because ordered by the family, etc. The truth I objectively discovered years later (but that has been murmuring in my heart, unheard, for long before) is that they both lied and they never really went to university—which finally made sense of their lack of practical knowledge of that world. For them, it had been a shipwrecked desire—either because they had thrown their family money into a fun life when it was meant to be for studying, or because they had not dared to row against the current of their native context—too impetuously dry to let their personal dreams flourish.

And if you can't have something, you usually also teach others not to want it, labeling it as useless if not harmful. The message I have always received from the wounded people of my family, from which no one has ever graduated, was this: I had to be the best, I could not fail, but I could not exceed the limits imposed by them. I had to become a luminary, a genius, in some field, even without going to university but simply “using my brain, developed thanks to their gentle and stimulating care,” but, at the same time, I could never dare to make them feel fragile by achieving what they always wanted but never admitted to themselves that they had failed to achieve. These family shadows, never spoken but always hovering, meant that although my parents were two professionals and the economic conditions were good despite the crisis, they never even remotely thought about the idea of being able to support the education of their children. New cars, holiday homes, trips and anything to show off were all better than books for those who, anyway, “could never understand them.” Better if all the knowledge available in the family's library—the only one worth knowing—was explained to me through my father's understanding of it.

At the age of 18, I was told that I had to make it by myself—as everyone does, as they had done. My real problem was that, unfortunately, my situation has never allowed me to apply for scholarships or economic aid, since, officially, on paper, my family could have afforded to pay for university.

Once, a former elementary school classmate of mine—the daughter of middle-class parents, who had ignored her university aspirations, told me that she went to a lawyer and asked

for money from her parents to pay for her studies since they could afford it and, due to high family income, she would have been left out of the possibility of successfully applying for scholarships. She obtained recognition and financial support. I remember looking at her petrified: was that really possible? A part of me hated her for her fierce courage; another part of me was scared of the unscrupulousness of her decision. I would never have done it, I told myself, however . . . I began to think that maybe I wasn't wrong to feel alone, humiliated, ridiculed, and taken for stupid if I didn't keep up to all my parents' unrealistic standards. I wasn't wrong to have dreams, aspirations, ambitions. I wasn't wrong to be craving more.

For years, I heard that aspiring to have “a normal student life” was just a thing for weak, spineless, and spoiled people. Supporting their kids in education when practical means to do so are available, is not something parents should be happy about. Students should be ashamed of saying “my parents got my back.” The brilliant student's duty was to graduate from a serious faculty—which were, of course, the ones they fakely bragged to have attended: law and medicine—while, at the same time, being able to pay full taxes, books, etc., with a humble but not trivial job. Because things we care about must be conquered. The problem was that “to keep it real,” according to their discourse, was not realistic at all: working full time as a professional, studying full time attending class and labs, and being economically independent. Let's not forget the importance of job choice, judged from an impossibly discriminative, ambiguous intellectualism: when I worked as a waitress, I had to hide it because it was considered a shame for the family. Plus, financial aid, funds, loans, or grants were simply proof of the ineffectiveness of my creativity, which was supposed to enable me to read the reality thoroughly and invent a fruitful, demanded, and high-level job. Like, obviously, all ingenious people would do, instead of pursuing spoiled dreams. I think that all these unrealistic, impossible standards were posed to function as deterrents, like a pricey cost to pay, if I ever wanted to chase “my childish power trip.” Let's not forget that “the frustration of not getting there, where you want, is the only way to become adults,” as my father loved to repeat to me, ridiculing certain ideas of mine when I was a young girl.

This kind of pedagogical indoctrination has always made me feel guilty about asking them anything, as if I was openly displaying weakness and immaturity. But I also had to be the best. It was expected—under penalty of shaming jokes and twisted confrontations with bright people from other family situations—that I would always find the best job, realize myself within the age of 20, ideally finish medicine or law before everyone else, without asking for anything; or, even better, I should have avoided academia and started my lonely path to end up being one of those who gets “an honorary degree for their pioneering work, as all big ones have ever done. None of them learnt it in university, but they taught it to others.” If we add the commandment of being economically autonomous in everything—equation of being mature in thought and personality, since I was no longer a capricious child—and above all to lay low, because I had to keep my desires and aspirations at bay, since in comparison to the family members, “self-made” through sacrifices, I was just a spoilt, whiny nobody . . . Well, it was a bit of a mess. But I eventually managed to unravel this complex tangle and solve a fairly knotty identity problem.

Part of this schizoid way of thinking just mentioned made me, indirectly, do something good for myself. I like to think that the solution is hinted at in the problem itself, especially when it's a complex problem. Even if at the beginning I was just following their doctrine and just wanted to prove I was autonomous, at least it made me move forward and start my troubled and guilty journey. I began working and, once I got enough money, secretly, as if it was outrageous, I enrolled as a distant learner in my BSc in Psychology. I would never have dared to aim too high. I couldn't even think that I could be and grow beyond the intentions of my parents. I thought—or, better, I

wanted to think—it was all normal: that as they said, people have to make themselves in a heroic way and that their refusal to support my studies was a matter of fine, healthy educational methods. Life is tough and we need to let go of our childish beliefs. So I was studying at university as it was my vicious, secret pleasure. Yet, a part of me always knew all this was dogshit. Thinking back on my choices, I guess that an authentic seed hidden beneath the monster armour was, in mysterious ways, planting its roots in the outside world to try and grow free. Little by little, those roots were strong enough to break the corpse's armour. Studying, reading, and letting my mind gallop, for me, have always been life-saving resources as I grew up in a family context of physical, emotional, and verbal violence, neglect, and manipulation. A place where I didn't feel safe because everything I heard and saw came in direct contradiction to what I felt to be true. Sometimes ghosts have more substance than the tangible masks under which they are hidden. Despite the attempts to occupy even this last personal space of mine, that of the mind, fantasy, hypotheses, and knowledge, for some reason a little, savage island has always attained to remain untouched and, over time, it emerged more and more until becoming a solid playful land on which I could run around in freedom. Not only that, it acquires boldness: it built bridges in the outside world.

I realize that those lies about my parents' phantom university experiences were traces of their remainings, their wounds—not mine. They both have quite a cultural level, which remained without proper nourishment. A skeleton without flesh and without blood, with broken bones, forced to stand on its feet thanks to crutches provided by prejudices and hate stereotypes. My parents' attitude was not a matter of eccentric passion for knowledge, nor intellectual criticism, nor condescension, but a matter of power. A power sought by those who felt they couldn't have any, despite the external grandiose facade they put on. I forgive them now: they had been ignored by their own parents economically, emotionally, and . . . physically, because deep needs are one with the body. A long extenuating ancestral syndrome that, without full awareness, I started to eradicate from myself thanks to little acts of treason.

I had never given much thought to being a first-gen university student; it was never something I had identified as, *per se*. I had never considered myself different from any other. In hindsight, I guess it was too hard to accept the fact that I couldn't receive the necessary financial and emotional support from my family. As time goes by, after overcoming the fear of being judged, I realized that the experience of a first-gen student can be a source of pride and not stigmatization. In reality, I didn't feel serene to admit it until I finally finished my BSc: part of my wound was healed, and I realized I could believe in my abilities despite my past difficulty in aiming for the best (telling myself that this thesis was unattainable and that I couldn't contact this professor due to my status, etc.). I actually realized that doing it on your own has a bitter-sweet taste, but it also means being able to follow your purest instincts and vocation—something I was previously taught to call arrogance. I believe that hearing discordant opinions from those who criticized me made me open my eyes to many things. I can say the same for the compliments of friends that I found hard to believe and to some extent fake at first, but I eventually learned how to appreciate them.

Now I find myself in a fortunate state of grace: I am satisfied with my past, my present, and my future, which seems attainable. After the BSc I could go on with an M.A. and then, thanks to high grades, I managed to access a lucky initiative of an Italian private bank that granted me an honorary loan to be able to continue pursuing the dream of a career in research, this time as a full-time student. I am now doing a Research Master in the UK and an Italian MSc at the same time. I am lucky and grateful that I have managed to do two Masters simultaneously in two different countries, which I will finish in a handful of months. I was probably starving of a “student hunger.” Time, I must say, has flown by. This path has given me the strength to feed my curiosity and

passions again. During this time I felt confident enough to be able to contact potential supervisors for a PhD and write down a proposal that actually reflects my interests, my identity and, one day, maybe my future. Also, I now am able to see in a different light my past: having to work in different contexts and positions can be seen not as a shame but as a resourceful set of experiences.

All the ambiguous messages and emotional confusion in which I found myself having to place my identity while growing up, blocked me for years. Yet, I don't know why, a force within, without me always being aware of it, has always pushed me towards something resonating with me deeply. Something in me has always managed to resist the icy digs, the deceitful indoctrination, the absence of alternative guides, and my objective economic impossibilities. Not only to resist, but also to find alternative paths in this jungle, avoiding obstacles to return to the main road. I was ashamed of these secondary routes taken, but now I know that they have been vital. Something has always moved in the direction that has led me to where I am now, and for that I am grateful. I called this something a part of me which was still true, authentic, strong and, most of all, alive—despite the dead cover. I believe I have happily committed a sin that requires courage to be committed: betraying my origin. Being a transgressor, going beyond one's creator, is the destiny of all Frankenstein's monsters. It is a painful and shameful rupture, the only necessary one to deliver me to . . . just myself.