

THE MONSTER AND HER MAN

by
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"What a life!

I've traveled across time and space.

I've seen and done things beyond imagination.

Blessed with friends like Pete and Lana and Jimmy.

And Batman... What incredible adventures we've shared.

What amazing people I've known.

But Lois... Dear Lois.

I loved you most of all."

Superman in All-Star Superman, Vol 2

Grant Morrison - DC COMICS

CHAPTER ONE

The ruins of the Nootka tribe had a word for a girl like me: *čihaa* (chee-ha).

It means, 'monster.'

The other people on Vancouver Island – all the smug, white assholes – had a different word: *André*. As in André "The Giant" Roussimoff. André was a professional wrestler in the 80s. A seven foot four man who weighed out at five hundred and twenty pounds of beer-soaked bullshit. Sweaty, hairy, smelly. Face like a tire. My own particulars aren't any of your business, but I know you're just itching to take my nicknames and stack me up in your mind like a goddamn sasquatch.

So no, I don't sweat like André did, but I do use men's deodorant. The good stuff. The cancer in the armpits stuff. Mischief managed. I'm hairy, but only in the winter and only underneath my sweatpants, but fuck you. I bet if you tried even one day of Canadian winter, you'd be curled up in a ball and squeezing hair right out of your ass. My face, fortunately, is better than André's by a gender-mile. As for booze? Never ever. Ever. Booze turned my dad's brain into mush. The only area where I'm willing to own a little André, beyond our excessive growth hormone, is wrestling.

Honestly, that's what the French giant and I really have in common. We don't take shit from anybody. Ever. The papers on the mainland can spin it anyway they want to, but I'm the only one with the truth. A boy fell from outer space and I kissed him and I meant it and I held him as he died.

I can't speak for Roussimoff, but I can sure as hell speak for myself:

A monster's heart breaks the hardest.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell is 5am on a bicycle in the fall.

In the winter you can brace yourself. You can see the snow gathered up on either lane of the PRH and grit the pain between your teeth. In the fall, though? The cold hides. Underneath the pines and in cruel, bone-chilling gusts. And never is it any worse than the early A-M. Night's last, icy surge before day.

My bike was more rust than red and too small for me by half. Donkey Kong on his Mario cart. On the very worst days, my knuckles cracked to the blood by the time I reached school. Ride or die.

My ride was always a solitary one; any time a pair of headlights came from one direction or the other, I'd steer into the trees or a yard. It was only ever the wrestling world on the road at that hour. Best case scenario, it was parents driving my teammates. And I use that term very fucking technically. These parents would pull over, guilt writ all over their faces, and offer me a ride – an offer that always sounded like someone had them at gunpoint. Better those moments, though, than the teammates who could drive themselves without supervision. I've had more horns and car hoods aimed at me than I can count.

So I'd hide if I needed to, breath huffing hot with dry toast and the peanut butter I'd drug it across for breakfast. Unpleasant leftovers and expiring throwaways from my mom's shift at *Shelter*. They were nice like that at the other end of the highway, careful to see that the help from the backend of the island didn't actually, literally starve.

Not that I'd have eaten any better if we could have afforded it.

Not with my weight being what it was, always a pound or five or the limit.

Not with the boys faking an earthquake with my every footfall.

That sound - their sound - was a constant. Like a headache or a heartbeat. I'd roll up to school, just a car or three in the lot, and I'd hear them. Through the open door to the gym, a rectangle of hot white light against the moody blue canvas of dawn. The whole crew - twelve of them - laughing about some inside joke or some slutty girl. Or that big-ass bitch they had to wrestle with. The one who probably, definitely, "I swear I've seen it!" had a dick. There wasn't any one of them that didn't have a bit of a standup act that they'd built around me; it was a second form of ID. *Mama'n'i* (ma-ma-slee) - white men - can't ever leave silence by its lonesome. Jokes on jokes on jokes. Alpha toppling Alpha. I made my whole wrestling team snuffle and snort like dogs and never was that sound any riper than the day before my seventeenth birthday.

The doorway to fluorescent laughter was paired with a steady howl of classic rock when I ducked inside the gym. *Fox on the Run* or something. I kept my eyes on the floor because that's just a thing I did. Because I was already an asshole even *with* a full night of sleep. Running on five hours made the anger come a lot easier than words, the fists a lot more liable to swing. So I dropped my bag by my bike and made a line for some wood where I didn't see any feet-

"I can't believe my eyes... Is that *Dorothy*?" Coach didn't miss a thing, though you'd have to be a bonafide bucket-head to miss anything as big as I was. "*The Dorothy*?" A Southern twang had burrowed inside my name since the day I was

born. Because of Kansas-Dorothy. Wizard-of-Oz-Dorothy. Drug-addict Dorothy. Broken-by-men Dorothy. Thing is, that wasn't even who I was named after.

My mom was a fan of Golden Girls, the show about old ladies being old. I think. I don't know. I didn't really watch it. There was the funny one, the cute one and – wouldn't you know it – the giant one. Dorothy.

"Hey, Boys – hey," all the squeaking sneakers stopped.

Lyrics from the stereo continued until Coach clipped them off-

*You scream and everybody comes a running,
take a run and hide yourself away---*

Coach cleared his throat in the silence. "Dorothy has something to say to us."

The fuck I did. I grabbed a loop of jump rope and did the thing I should have been doing fifteen minutes earlier. Eyes on the ground, feet over the rope – spack, spack, spack – sometimes I could bite hard enough on silence to be left alone.

"DOROTHY."

Not that time. Twenty-four eyes locked in on me, colored with zoo-viewing indifference. Pink cheeks, zitty foreheads, sweaty buzzcuts – three of them bleached blonde in that signature, Busching Brothers way. There was the Tall Quiet Asshole (Jimmy), The Medium-Sized Jittery Asshole (Bill) and Ol' Knubdick Treestump The First. Roy. Black eyes, shriveled heart. A chest puffer and a toe-walker and The Joker to my middle finger.

He'd crept out in front, close enough to smell he'd had an early-morning smoke. Close enough to make me feel like I was some kind of show he'd bought tickets to.

“Something you want to say to your team, Dorothy?” Coach moved out of the way like he expected me to take center stage and Roy, popping on the tips of his toes, waited for me to do the same. Smiling with that ‘remember that one time’ look in his eyes.

Remember that one time when I embarrassed you in front of the whole town? When you made the wrestling team and my brothers and I snuck out in the middle of the night to celebrate? Remember we went to the Raven Lady statue out in front of *Jigger’s*, that big, steel native lady that kind of doesn’t-at-all look like you? Remember how we squeezed a singlet over her head and a cucumber in her crotch and we wrote DOROTHY on her ass in bright, red lipstick? Remember?

I did. And I remember how their sheriff father punished them with laughter.

Coach cleared his throat, a final invitation for me to speak.

“I had a flat tire,” I mumbled.

Roy giggled and pointed at my bike on the wall. Shitty, sure. But flat, no.

“I see it, Roy.” Coach dismissed his help. “I need better, Dorothy.”

He got what I was willing to give.

Coach bit down on something ugly he meant to say, grumbling like a stuck engine. He looked a bit like an off-season Santa, like someone had rolled him down a rocky hillside. White, mismanaged hair, a retro red track suit. Swollen, ruddy and prone to limping. Forever pushing me towards a nicer list than I was ever going to be capable of. “I want fifteen bear crawls.”

Roy turned round to spread a laugh with his brothers, but Coach clarified-

“All of you.”

The room groaned and their eyes slid into crosshairs.

Bill – the medium one - dipped in to feed Roy a whisper. *“Fuck her, Man..!”*

“We’re a team,” Coach said, just like every single coach had for thousands of years before him. It wasn’t worth the oxygen he fed it. “If Dorothy can’t be bothered to give us fifteen of her minutes, I’m not going to bother wasting fifteen of my own on the mats. Drills are easy. I’ll drill you straight into first period.” He snorted a load of tobacco-tinged snot straight into his mouth. “On the wall.” He clapped his hands and pointed, swallowing the crud he’d curdled into his mouth. “Let’s go!”

Twelve of us made our way to the back wall. Hands down, butts up. You know, like a bear. Our legs would barely work by the time we were done with it.

Big Brother Jimmy dropped down next to me, bumping me with a deliberate shoulder while he bucked his fat backside into the air. I probably could have took him if I had to, but you never got one of them alone, not ever.

Bill was loaded for a bear crawl on my right and little Roy-

The thirteenth member of our team took his sweet time looking for an open spot, shuffling his feet like they were lost. They slowed in front of my face and down stooped Roy, matching my eyes with his. *“Just stay home next time,”* he whispered.

Coach clapped for order. “On the wall, Roy!”

Roy’s grin gleamed with silver braces. Like a devious android.

“Roy – you want me to make it twenty?”

“Put yourself out of our misery,” Roy whispered, hiding a gun-shaped hand that he aimed and fired at my face. He gave me his backside without another word, a wave to Coach to mask any signs of foul play. I could have jumped up his back right

then. Grabbed his head from behind, driven it straight into the wood. Spread crimson down the creases and smeared scarlet into the grain. It was a vivid picture. Salivation via the imagination. It was also a death sentence for my one-lane future.

I'd shoplifted twice. I'd told a history teacher to fuck off when she asked me to supply my own Kleenex for her classroom during cold season. I'd popped my math teacher's tire with a box cutter when he made a scene out of me falling asleep in his class. And those were just the things I'd been caught doing. Continued offenses would mean an expulsion or an arrest and the absolute end to a career that didn't even exist yet. One swing at Roy that wasn't Coach-sanctioned would do it.

No mainland and no real world and no World Wrestling Entertainment. No big contract with money enough to assault Roy and his brothers and my whole damn island straight into the ground.

"Asses up!" The Coach sucked a stained, silver whistle into his mouth. "You ready down there, Dorothy?"

I wasn't. Not ever. "Yes."

Coach spat inside the whistle and the high, shrill noise goaded our tired limbs down one length and back the other. The whistle came again and again, Coach choking on garbled threats and encouragement, all the while paying no particular mind to the accruing damage his team was waging upon his giant.

Youth isn't wasted on the young; it's a journey concluded by the lucky and the lovable only. I had a right to be big and left alone like the Busching Brothers had a right to shit on every minute of my life, to live inside my dreams and the shadows and the edges of every smiled I willed into a mirror. We did fifteen bear crawls that

day and both of those bigger Busching Brothers battered me up and down every one of them. Shoulders and elbows and accidental kicks. And I kept my mouth shut and I kept my eyes down and I took my shit. For too long, Coach existed somewhere above it all. Never evil, but never anywhere near present, either. "Warriors, on three...!"

Everyone would gather round, twenty-four hateful hands in a pile and all the while, the bomb inside me was winding ever tighter.

One (*tick!*)-

Two (*tick!*)-

Three (*tick!*)-

"WARRIORS!"

BOOM.

"Dead bodies. That's a new one."

A dead body. Not plural. The internet search window was barred with a grey rectangle and a red octagon, white palm raised in the middle of it. She'd misread the text beneath it:

Oops! You can't view results for this search: "*dead body of Dennis Wilson.*"

To access these search results, you'll need an admin password.

I pointed at the screen, hoping it would be enough for Fran to keystroke a password without conversation. She always looked like she'd been outfitted for her role as school librarian by someone in Hollywood. Greying red hair pulled taught inside a bun, aggressive lipstick. A book-themed tee - "Bookworms take *SHELFIES*" - partially obscured by a ratty cardigan. She looked like she'd spent part of her life living as an actual book, like in *Beauty in the Beast*. Like someone with a boring cover image and a slightly surprising interior. *Slightly*.

"Who's Dennis Wilson?" she asked.

"Nevermind."

I would have slid out and escaped to an empty library table if she wasn't glued to the back of my chair. Her hands were mounted on the backrest like a bird of prey. Like the chair depended upon her to hold my fat ass atop it.

At lunch, I cut out of fourth period early, grabbed my free brown bag from the cafeteria and bolted for the library. To a desk and a computer and the internet. It was a porthole to the real world and the only way to feed my obsessive need to know things in their entirety without asking for help from other people. Like Fran. It's where I'd gone after I'd found a Beach Boys record in my parent's closet. In one ear and straight down the rabbit hole. I never, ever did anything in moderation and after months of discography diving, I'd settled on my favorite Beach Boy. Dennis. And the sudden need to see photos of his dead body.

"So you're going to make me go home tonight wondering why you're looking at bodies on my computer?" *BODY* - and the computer wasn't hers. She leaned

across the keys and put a new string of words inside the search box: "Who is Dennis Wilson?"

Idiot.

A black and white photo pops up. Dennis, shirtless, long hair blowing as he sits atop a car. Pure beefcake. Beside him, some text:

Dennis Carl **Wilson** (December 4, 1944 – December 28, 1983) was an American musician, singer, and songwriter who co-founded the Beach Boys. He is best remembered as their drummer and as the middle brother of bandmates Brian and Carl **Wilson**.

"Oh!" she clucked. "I love the Beach Boys!"

No she didn't. Well. She did in the way that everyone just kind of says they love chocolate and Christmas. It's just a thing people do. Sprinkle the world with meritless love.

You have to know someone to love them. All the way.

You have to know that the Beach Boys made a lot of music after *Barbara Ann*. Fuck Barbara Ann. The Beach Boys made complicated songs. Sad songs. The Beach Boys once had two members from South Africa. And Glenn Campbell. Glenn Campbell wrote the guitar lick to *Tequila*, okay? The Beach Boys are not a joke or a throwback or something you enjoy just-because. And people who understand these things know that the only reason The Beach Boys even existed was because of Dennis. Because he was the only one who really did the beach boy thing. The surfing

and the cars and the women. Dennis also threw up on Mike Love - one of the founding members - while he was meditating because Mike Love was a royal dick. Dennis didn't just drum - he also sang and played piano and he dated Christine McVie - *Fleetwood Mac* McVie - and he hung out with Charles Manson and he might have dated his illegitimate second cousin and he definitely wrote *Forever* which is the best Beach Boys love song of all time and he was probably a real asshole to be around but-

But-

What other kind of men did I know?

Fran stepped off of my chair and made like she was getting ready to perform. Arms swinging, a smile on her face. A pointed toe. "You know I'm originally from California?"

I didn't and did not care. She elaborated anyway-

"I'm a *California girl*?"

I wanted to throw up on *her* while she was meditating. That song blew.

"What?" she asked.

I pushed out of my chair, the bell ringing as I tore off.

"Dorothy - hey!"

Dennis Wilson drowned. He died diving off a dock in search of lost treasures from a life he ruined every single chance he got. I just wanted to see if the face he'd made when he died looked sad or relieved.

When the last bell rang, I stomped over the bike rack as quick as I could and found my exit barred. My tires were flat. It's not impossible to ride a bike on flat tires, but it most certainly is when you tip the scales like I did. All four valve caps were gone, the deflation the concentrated result of someone sitting atop the frame until the air was exhausted and empty. More than likely it was *three* someones, and all of them related. I didn't bother looking around for a single one of them, because they were definitely watching and waiting for a reaction.

I called my mother's restaurant from the phone in the office, with Carol, the office lady with the color-changing transition glasses, keeping watch like a prison guard. As if running off with her sticky, titty-tan colored rotary phone was my life's one great purpose. As if I were Frodo, her antiquated phone the One, True Ring. Something about the odd afternoon light and the way the windows were arranged always turned Carol's lenses dark and it frustrated her to no end. She took them off and squinted at me while I waited for someone to pick up-

It ended up being Karen, the hostess at my mother's restaurant.

Greetings from The Pointe - how can I help you?

"I need a ride home."

She cleared her throat to help maintain her hourly cheer.

...Dorothy. How are you?

I hung up on her, not feeling up for bullshit. It would sort itself it.

Carol squinted at me and raced a nervous tongue across her lips as she tried to wish me away from her phone and the office and the responsibility of the school. I

stared right back at her until she was forced to hide behind her glasses again. They were tinted completely black, her authoritative glare extinguished. Like Cyclops and his ruby-quartz specs.

The phone rang again and I answered. It was my mother this time.

I am busy.

"My tires are flat."

How?

"All of them."

She sighed. My situation was no accident, our options stretched to nothing.

She would let it simmer her to immobility if I let her. "I need a ride."

My mother snapped out of it, cupping the phone to whisper to a nearby observer. Karen - her ride to work and my only hopes for a similar assist. She returned, breathing through a quick nod until she remembered to talk. "Okay. It will be an hour. She is very tired." This was a thinly-veiled request for manners and good behavior. "Do you hear me?"

"Bye." I hung up and considered my options for the hour. A too-small chair, booby-trapped with gum on the underside. Old yearbooks. Peppermint discs. I had a Superman trade in my backpack, but I needed privacy when I read; my lips moved no matter how hard I tried, another gift from my father.

Plus there was Carol's ridiculously tinted glare. It made it look like she had giant, black cartoon eyes. I decided to test their opacity before I went outside for option B-

I put up a middle finger and Carol straightened up in her seat, clucking noises before she finally managed to make the sounds for my name, but I lowered a shoulder against the door and slipped out before a meritless threat was levied.

They picked me up about two hours later, with the sun lost to the blues of darkness and the metal frame of my bike turned cold. I'd read the Superman book twice, in a private huddle between the bushes. It's my favorite book – Grant Morrison's All-Star Superman. It's the big, blue boy scout at his most vulnerable and human. I knew it was bullshit – the idea that someone so powerful would be left to do something so selfless. Not with the world watching. Not with a town full of dicks stoking the flames any time they approached the glow.

Still. I loved it.

I loved Quitely's art and how big and quiet everything looked and the part-

I loved all the parts-

But the part where Superman treats Lois to his powers for a day?

Where he covers her humanity-

The part he loves most-

Just to humanize himself and maybe-

Someday-

Make a chance at romance less fantastical and more factual?

Bushes aren't just for mouth-readers-

They're also for big girls with Disney-shaped hearts.

Karen honked twice and waved a hand out the open roof of her champagne convertible, a row of bracelets jangling to a stop around her elbow. She was always set for summer in spite of the coming winter, her skin an inexplicable golden-brown in a land of grim and icy tones.

She had a special greeting just for me. "Hey, Little Lady!"

I slammed my bike inside her open trunk, my jaw clenched against the cold.

My mother was in the passenger seat, her jaw clenched not for cold but for fear of what happened when Karen's mainland disposition mixed with mine.

It was a two-door car, but I could step over the body and fold myself in the backseat without too much trouble. My mother had already pulled her seat all the way up and wedged her knees against the glove compartment in anticipation.

Karen winked a green eye closed in the rear-view. "Buckled?"

She thought we were friends ever since I let her color half my hair purple. I shaved the other half the very next day, just to prove I wasn't entirely reliant on her help. My mother hated it, my father, like everything else, hadn't seemed to notice.

Karen told me it was *wild*.

She slapped another double honk on the horn before we sped off.

Karen had a boyfriend with a big wallet and a bigger libido. His family owned the restaurant they worked at and she more or less took shifts just to have some sort of forum to display her tan and the matching jewelry.

"You have a good day?" My mother's weak voice barely made it to the backseat, lost as it was in the wind and the erratic tentacles of her long, raven-black

hair. She was more hair than woman, its length akin to the last time she'd felt confident enough to exist without an accessory to hide behind.

Your hair..!

It's so long!

How long are you going to grow it?!

Must take forever to dry it!

The longer it got, the less likely someone was going to remember they wanted to ask her about me - about that *giant daughter of yours!*

Karen had a follow up. "You still wrestling?"

As if it was some trendy new app I'd be weaning myself off of.

I looked down at my hands to avoid further conversation. No doubt Karen had countered with an eye roll. She laughed and mumbled something to my mother and left me - mercifully - to silence for the rest of our chilly ride.

My mother opened the door for me to climb out of the car like a civilized person and I cleared the frame in a single bound anyway. There were always eyes in the windows of our mobile home park, loyal viewers of the Giant Show. To act small was to invite normalcy. Bigger was better, neighbors less likely to bother me.

"Bye, Mamma-Loo!" Karen scissored her fingers at my mother.

"Thank you, Karen." My mother kissed her palm to toss a kiss and I thought to swat the imaginary object out of the sky. "We will see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" asked Karen.

The same question was in my own mind.

"For her birthday!"

I wanted to sink straight into the earth. To be anywhere but there, on the eve of a day I'd always dreaded. At the intersection between my mother's hopes and her blinding inability to accept hopelessness. She saved year-round for my birthday, for the cake and the plates and balloons. For the open-invitation that she swore would bring out the best in our neighbors and some normalcy to my life.

Talk - laugh - be a girl!

At least when I wrestled, when the whole town's eyes were upon me, I could deliver a message to opponent and witness alike. Total annihilation. Stay away. Ivan Drago-style - *I must break you*. But there, in our mobile home, at those birthday parties my mother forced upon me, it was a chance to not just feed the lion but tempt it into termination. I was a giant on a leash, every one of those fake-friends a would-be Jack looking to topple my beanstalk.

"Wouldn't miss it!" said Karen.

No shit - neither would anyone else.