

Signs of Life

By Hannah Crouch

Mary Shelley sits at a desk, illuminated by a candle. Her hair is down and she wears a nightgown. She rolls a pen between her fingers and studies a blank page. She attempts to write for a while and then picks up the page to read it. She frowns, scratches out a few lines, then scratches out a few more. Percy Shelley walks onstage; he looks a little worse for wear. He removes his waistcoat then turns to Mary and watches her for a moment. He goes over to her and places a kiss on her neck.

PERCY

Come to bed.

MARY

For a Romantic, you're not particularly adept at persuading me to bed.

PERCY

I will be honest with you; I am too tired to try.

MARY

Byron's fine wine and unmatched wit has you so undone?

PERCY

Indeed. Now, bed.

MARY

You go, if you wish. I will attempt...

PERCY

Mary, you don't have to force yourself to write... if anything it could be the worst thing to conjure inspiration.

MARY

Everyone has come up with a ghost story of some kind, and I cannot bear to come down each morning to be asked whether I have thought of one.

PERCY

Then I will tell them to stop asking you.

MARY

And bear the shame of being thought of as cowardly or so insipid that I lack the imagination to come up with anything at all?

PERCY

What exactly are you planning to write when it is past one and any man who is good or decent has already gone to bed?

Mary grins and looks at Percy.

MARY

Well then tis a shame you are neither good or decent.

PERCY

Aye, a good man would try harder to make you come to bed. Now, goodnight.

He kisses her on her cheek and runs his hand through her hair.

Do not stay up too late.

MARY

I hardly see the point in sleeping, I find it so hard with this weather. The storms and thunder do not cease.

PERCY

I do not find that to be such a difficulty, especially when we have talked for so long.

He yawns.

Still should lend a hand with your story, I imagine.

He strokes the back of her head and then leaves the room. Mary looks up, out the windows at the ongoing storm. A flash of lighting illuminates the whole stage. Mary looks Stage Right and sees a younger version of herself sat by a grave stone. Younger Mary carefully traces the letters with her finger. Her father William walks onstage and stands over her.

WILLIAM

I am to marry again.

Younger Mary's hand stills. It hovers for a moment, clenches and falls in her lap.

YOUNGER MARY

Why?

WILLIAM

Why? Why, because I am not particularly wealthy, I am struggling to keep you all.

Younger Mary frowns.

YOUNGER MARY

Keep us? I could keep myself.

William smiles and sits beside her.

WILLIAM

You intend to earn a living?

YOUNGER MARY

Yes.

WILLIAM

And what will you do?

YOUNGER MARY

Write, like you and Mama.

WILLIAM

Well, I will warn you now, there is not a good deal of money in it, Mary. In any case, a man must provide for his family, in any way he can.

YOUNGER MARY

How does marrying someone do such a thing?

WILLIAM

You are almost too smart for your own good. But I'll speak to you plainly. If I marry for a woman's wealth, then that wealth becomes my own. It will give me some funds for a time.

YOUNGER MARY

How long of a time?

WILLIAM

Well, until my own fortune is somewhat restored.

YOUNGER MARY

And when will that be?

WILLIAM

I cannot say with certainty.

YOUNGER MARY

Then how do you know it will work?

WILLIAM

Because it has to, Mary.

Pause.

YOUNGER MARY

It is not very nice to marry someone just for money.

WILLIAM

No, indeed it is not.

YOUNGER MARY

But you will do it anyway?

WILLIAM

It is not a choice I make with ease or joy, but to ensure you and your sister do not starve or are taken from me, I will do it.

Long pause.

YOUNGER MARY

I will not marry, not for wealth or love.

William smiles.

WILLIAM

Then you are wise beyond your years. Come, the air grows cold, we should keep walking.

He helps Younger Mary up and they continue their walk. As William passes Mary, sat in her chair, he passes her a bundle. Mary looks confused, unwraps the bundle. A coo of a baby is heard. Mary bows her head and weeps. She lifts her head up and looks at the baby.

MARY

That you cannot do to me. You cannot haunt me again, I forbid it. You ought not to be here.

Pause.

If only I could write about you. Your shadow. Sometimes I hear you, I hear your cries at night and, in waking, I long to comfort you. You snuck away so quietly, so softly. I wish you had given me some warning.

Pause. The baby's coo grows fainter.

The creation by a woman is so very different from a man's. For a woman it is all encompassing, we give, and give, and give and do not stop giving until there is nothing left, and I fear you took part of me with you when you went and did not return it to me. You burnt it from me.

Mary rocks the baby, then gently taps the baby's cheek.

No, don't do this now. Wake up, little one.

She rubs the baby's belly.

Please don't. Please don't. Don't be dead.

The lighting flashes. In the darkness the baby disappears, and when the stage is lit again Mary jerks awake. She looks around confused and looks down at her empty arms. She curls her hand as though holding the weight of a baby's head. A figure moves

from the back of the stage forward, Mary turns around hearing the footsteps, but cannot see the face of the person. The figure moves the candle from her desk.

MARY

There is no need to be so blunt, Percy. I intend to go to bed. I've had such strange dreams.

She gets up and stretches. The figure removes the pen and inkstand from the desk.

You are quiet.

The figure spreads a white sheet over the desk. Mary frowns and grasps the sheet between finger and thumb.

Are you putting my desk to rest? You are so keen to prevent me from spending another moment here!

She turns around to face the figure, who scoops her up and lays her on the desk. Mary gasps and struggles to sit up, but the figure pushes her back down.

Percy!

The figure covers her with another longer, heavier sheet, tying the ends to the legs of the desk and trapping her within it. Mary tries to find a way out, her hands stretching the material.

Percy stop!

The figure, Frankenstein, stops momentarily. Then grasps a notebook and pen, and begins frantically writing. Then looks up to the audience and begins an excitable lecture.

FRANKENSTEIN

One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. Darkness had no effect upon my fancy, and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm.

Thunder can be heard, but it is now distant, the storm is beginning to pass. Instead a whining, high pitched noise can be heard and then a sharp crack of electricity. Mary jolts in fright and Frankenstein looks at the desk, entranced. Mary finds a flap in the material where it has not been tied down, she wriggles a hand out. Frankenstein spots this and pushes

her hand back inside the sheets, securing the material further. Mary angrily thrashes about, pushing back, she manages to rip aside the fabric and claws her way out. Frankenstein moves back in shock. Finally, out of the sheets, Mary breathes heavily, back bowed, hands holding onto the table for support. She wheels round to face Frankenstein. He is staring at her.

MARY

Why did you do such a thing? Who are you?

Frankenstein opens his mouth to speak, then closes it.

Answer me!

He remains silent. Mary becomes more enraged.

I command you, speak!

Mary lunges over to him, grasps him by his shirt, dragging him over. Frankenstein slips and falls to his knees.

Why? Tell me why?

Frankenstein dumbly shakes his head. Mary shakes him forcefully.

SPEAK!

He opens and closes his mouth, and in disgust she almost throws him aside. He scrambles to his feet and, hearing the noise, Mary turns around. The lighting flashes and in the brief moment of darkness, Frankenstein runs. He is replaced by the Creature. When the stage is lit once more, Mary takes in the Creature, she stumbles backwards. He stumbles forward.

Who are you? What are you?

The Creature opens his mouth, grunts and groans, attempting to mimic her speech. Mary stills. She tilts her head to one side. The Creature watches the movement intently, then copies it, clumsily. Mary gasps and moves back again. The Creature gasps, then coughs violently. Mary watches, then reaches a hand out to touch the Creature. He lifts his head and reaches his hand out to hers.

Who are you?

The light flickers on in the room. The Creature is gone and Mary is still standing with her hand outstretched. Percy enters.

PERCY

Mary, what on earth are you doing?

Mary falters, looks to Percy, looks back to where the Creature had been stood before.

MARY

I... I hardly know anymore.

Pause.

I suppose praying that you are not another frightful apparition.

Percy approaches her, gently holds her in his arms, she rests her head on his chest.

PERCY

I will not tell you again. Come to bed.

MARY

I scarcely know if I can. I had such terrible dreams.

PERCY

What did you dream of?

MARY

It seems impossible to describe. A creature... a creation... a man... a beast... I am unsure where to begin...

PERCY

Tell me you are not dreaming of Byron?

Mary sighs and rolls her eyes.

MARY

No, it was not Byron. It was something altogether stranger, if such a thing is possible.

PERCY

Well, tell us about it in the morning, perhaps it will serve as your horror story.

Mary pauses for a moment reflecting on her dreams. She nods solemnly and then looks to Percy.

MARY

I think it will suffice.

Percy offers his hand to her, and then wraps his arm around her, taking her offstage and to bed.