

# We Are the Strange and Scary Things in These Woods

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<https://margaretkilljoy.substack.com/p/we-are-the-strange-and-scary-things>

*"I ask not to be safe from my enemies, but dangerous to them."  
-the anarchist's prayer*

I stopped watching horror movies maybe twelve years ago, while I was living in a van. See, I spent a lot of nights alone in that van in the middle of nowhere—deep in the woods or in empty parking lots all over the country—and it didn't do my nervous system much good to watch horror movies. People like me, the strange and ominous drifter, we're usually killed not too long after we tell the plucky-but-unlucky protagonists about the ancient horrors that lie beneath the snow or whatever. The point is, I was alone in scary places often enough, and it didn't do me much good to watch horror.

In 2019, I moved into a tiny, black A-frame cabin nestled into the woods. It wasn't quite the middle of nowhere—there were maybe two neighbors who could have heard me scream. But there was no one in sight. The first night I spent in that cabin, I felt like I was in, you know, a horror movie. There I was, a dark and stormy night, too distracted by the flashes of lightning through the glass window in the door to pay attention to my sweetheart. I was waiting for the next flash to illuminate a silhouette against trees.

Instead, it was fine. The next day, we laid flooring and they talked about their love, as a queer sex worker, of true crime podcasts.

For the first month or so, as I walked up the hill at night to my cabin, I was afraid. I clutched a knife; I jumped at shadows. It wasn't long before I stopped being afraid of those woods. Maybe, more than anything, I stopped being afraid because I realized: I was the scary thing in those woods.

The first entry in the first [Liber Monstorum](#), the book of monsters from the late 7th or early 8th century, is a trans woman—or perhaps an intersex person. Someone who appears masculine who lives as a woman.

In the average horror movie, I wasn't the ominous first victim, I was the monster.

I was an armed trans woman living alone in the woods in a black A-frame cabin that I built myself. The path to my house started at the end of a gravel road and weaved its way through a land project filled with armed queers with dogs.

Nazis doxed me around that time in my life, determining, incorrectly, that I was one of the leaders of antifa. They passed photos of me around. They passed around information about where I lived, about who I hung out with. It's a nice enough writeup; they picked flattering photos and exaggerated the importance of both my writing and my activism. And I just... wasn't scared. I don't mean this as bravado. I wasn't even brave—you have to be afraid in order to be brave. The Nazis didn't scare me. The Nazis, instead, clearly, were scared of me.

This is the proper order of things.

I watch horror movies again sometimes.

As a queer person in the US, especially as a trans woman living in a deep red state, we're entering frightful times. This time, I won't pretend I'm not scared. This time, I will be brave. We're entering frightful times, but we are not powerless, and we are at least as frightening as our foes.

I live in West Virginia, and I'm no more afraid to live here than elsewhere. To be clear, there are specific and tangible threats that queer people are facing from the legal systems of red states. If I had, or was, a trans child or teenager, I'd likely be looking hard at other places to live, other places where access to medical care was more certain.

To be brave in the face of threats isn't to ignore those threats. While I would never advise anyone to run (or to stay), I think it behooves a lot of people, especially trans people, to keep their passports in order and make some contingency plans. I've been pondering changing my name legally for awhile, but recent events have made me a lot less interested in doing so anytime soon—I'd rather that my government name be unconnected with my political writing and I'd rather that my government name match the gender I pass more easily as.

But just because there are very real threats facing us—both now and clearly visible on the horizon—doesn't mean we don't have agency, and it doesn't mean that we ought to give up, to flee, or despair. It has never been safe to be a trans person in this country. We, after enormous effort and bloodshed, had reached some high water marks in terms of legal protections and cultural acceptance, and we're seeing that high tide recede in front of us. That's okay. We've been through it before. Maybe not as individuals, but certainly as a culture.

A journalist named Edward R Murrow has a quote that floats through my head often enough: "remember that we are not descended from fearful men."

We queers have a lineage of bravery that simply cannot be argued.

The longer quote from Murrow is actually worth bringing up too, in this context and this moment. He was writing about Senator McCarthy, he was writing against the red scare. “We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men—not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes that were, for the moment, unpopular.”

The idea in that quote is that we must fight McCarthyism, for sure, but also that we ought not to be driven by fear into an age of unreason. We ought not to let fear of one another dominate our lives. For the most part, I want to say this to all of the people who have bought into the propaganda against queer people, especially trans people, of late. But I also want to remind *myself* of this. We ought not walk in fear, one of another.

I have enemies, to be sure. They’ve sent me photos of my family. They’ve told me they would burn down my house with me inside. But the average person, including the average person here in West Virginia where I live, is not my enemy. I am frustrated—beyond frustrated—to know that an overwhelming majority of my neighbors voted for a president who explicitly spreads hatred against queer people. Yet these people have never made me feel unsafe personally.

I’ve lived in an awful lot of places, and frankly I’ve dealt with far more harassment in cities (coincidentally blue state cities, based on where I’ve lived) than I’ve ever gotten in small towns (often in red states). This isn’t because the countryside is some magical place free from bigotry, but simply because there are fewer people here. If I walk down the street in New York City, I will pass literally thousands of people, so it’s far more likely that someone will say something terrible to me.

My data is also skewed by the fact that I subconsciously expect to be safer in big liberal cities, so I take fewer precautions and dress more provocatively. Where I live, sometimes I “boy mode.” Sometimes I don’t. Some of the people around here know I’m a trans woman, some just think I’m a weird queer man with bangs and earrings (and pickup truck and a Carhartt coat, which helps). No one really gives me shit.

It’s not like you cross the imaginary line from Maryland to West Virginia and suddenly everyone is a different type of person. The people here aren’t, you know, monsters. No matter what horror movies have told you.

The motto you run across most in community defense is “we keep us safe,” and it’s something I believe to the bottom of my soul. I do not have an expectation that the state will keep me safe. Maybe I should be able to have that. It’s nice when there are laws in place telling employers they can’t fire employees for being trans. But even when those laws are in place, it’s damned hard to find a job as a non-passing trans person. (I am lucky personally, because in my field as “anarchist author and podcaster” it’s not a problem.)

There’s a difference between “fault” and “responsibility” that people sometimes struggle with in activist circles. It is not my fault that society sees me as monstrous—that viewing me as monstrous

is older than the modern English language. It is not my fault that people struggle to accept me. It is not my fault that trans women are the center of a culture war because we make such a good wedge issue with which to try to divide progressives from liberals.

My own safety and liberation, though, are my own responsibility. No one else (besides a broader community “we” of queers and anarchists and activists) is going to do it for me. If I want to live in a better world, a safer world, I need to accept that that is on me and stop waiting for someone else to save me.

Even anti-discrimination laws, who are they enforced by? The cops? The cops are, famously, not exactly the most accepting of people.

But I, and “we,” are not alone in this fight.

Years before I moved to West Virginia, I came through to try to help out in the fight against mountaintop removal coal mining. I stayed up late one night talking to an old retired union coal miner, a white man named Sid who has sadly since passed on.

He told me a story about fighting against the Vietnam War in the late 60s. He said: “We would stand on one corner with our anti-war signs, and on the other corner were the Black radicals with their anti-racism signs, and on a third corner were the gay folks with their gay rights signs. Then one day we all realized we’d all be stronger if we all stood on the same corner, so we did and we were.”

It was so simple and true. A metaphor and a true story all at once.

He’s also an example of the one of the kinds of person you’ll find in West Virginia, the kind of coal miner who stood with Black and gay activists fifty years ago and was arrested defending the mountains ten years ago, in the autumn of his life.

I’m afraid of what’s coming, but I’m not terrified. I’m aware of the fact that I live in a red state, but I’m not terrified. If we are monsters, then we have claws and we have fangs. If we are monsters, then we can terrify. If we are monsters, then we have friends. If we are monsters, then we have a lineage of power. If we are monsters, we have each other.

Or none of us are monsters, us or them, and we’re all people. Dangerous people.

I do like monsters though. And really creepy horror movies.

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