

# Introduction

## The Monster at the End of This Book

For a number of years, I was under the impression that my birth was the result of an immaculate conception. Not *the* Immaculate Conception; a regular immaculate conception of an ordinary variety. I didn't think I was particularly special or meant to die so that the world might be saved from their sins. (I struggle to get through a CrossFit class, so actual crucifixion might be a bit of a heavy lift.) I understood that some people got pregnant to have babies; I simply thought I'd been opted out of that particular program. It made just as much sense to me that the universe had given a baby to my parents because they were nice people who photographed well.

When my mother would tell me about life before me, she would always say the same thing: "We wanted a child so badly. My arms used to ache for the weight of a baby. We prayed and we prayed and we prayed, and finally, God gave you to us."

How would you interpret that story? Immaculately, that's how.

I thought some people just got babies handed to them like party favors at a quinceañera by a creator-type figure. Bob and Judi asked very nicely; cue my entrance, *avec* jazz hands.

This all checks out. At least as much as the *other* Immaculate Conception, aka the birth of Jesus. On that I was an expert, having gotten straight As in Sunday school for years (there were no grades, but I scored myself). Plus, I was a very good child—obedient, pleasant, an avid reader, an unrepentant snitch—so of course I knew the story backwards and forwards—the angel and the three kings and the sheep and Mariah Carey singing "All I Want for Christmas Is You," etc. My own sudden appearance on the scene—regular yet also extraordinary, sans animals, no

royalty RSVPs—was totally within my conceptual wheelhouse. What I couldn't figure out, however, was *why*.

As a child I liked certainty, and order, and clear explanations, even if they tended to involve miracles. But life, of course, can quickly get complicated and human and not at all miraculous. I'd sometimes find myself so lost in a question or a problem that the only solution I could think of was for an older version of myself to walk through a rift in the space-time continuum and let me know what happens. Immaculately. As my concept of self expanded and evolved beyond my extraordinary beginnings, different parts of who I was began to prompt queries that I thought only the future could answer. I had this idea that the challenges I suddenly encountered—my blackness or my gayness or my Christianness or my Americanness and their intersections—would somehow get uncomplicated through the magic of time, like a movie montage.

Spoiler alert: they did not.

But I would think about the supposed perfection of the future constantly. I'd be sitting in my childhood bedroom or my college dorm or my first apartment, just staring at the door like “Any minute now in the future they're going to invent time travel and some well-dressed old black man with no wrinkles is going to come bursting through and give me the answers to this take-home quiz or whatever.” (Sometimes my questions were existential; sometimes they were AP Statistical.) The basic concern was always the same: am I really here for this?

The big idea, as I saw it, was this: You don't exist for a long time. Before you arrive, there are ages, eons— an eternity—without you. (Can you imagine? How boring!) And suddenly there you are. Alive. How you doing? How's it feel? Immaculate? What if it feels bad? Don't worry; it gets better, right? But what if it doesn't get better, it just gets. It just keeps getting.

What then? You still interested? You still trying to be good, still moisturizing your T-zone, still working through your stack of *New Yorkers*, still fighting systemic oppression, still speaking truth to power, still attempting to exist? Still? What if I told you, at another point—fixed, supposedly, but totally unknown—you suddenly, mysteriously, immaculately won't *be* anymore? Again.

Does that sound like something you want to do?

I'm a spoiler kween. My favorite part of reading mystery novels is flipping ahead to the last chapter. Of course at that point I'm always like, "Who are all of *these* people? How did this happen? When did they go to *Nova Scotia*?" So I have to go back to reread and find out. Ugh, it's a whole process. My relationship with mystery is *fraught*. It was the same with Choose Your Own Adventures. I certainly wasn't about to go flipping through a book willy-nilly letting fate take me on a ride like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. I always turned to an option, read it, kept my finger in it, and then flipped back and read the other option. Like a normal American. Some books tried to get slick and give you four or five choices. The joke was on them, though: I had five fingers.

Ten actually, now that I think about it.

This book is not a Choose Your Own Adventure, much as I would have liked the option in real life. It's the opposite of that, actually, if such a thing is possible. It might be a mystery, though. At the end I gather all the suspects in a room and there are some very bold accusations made. It involves a luxury ocean liner. There's a caftan. Things escalate!

More than anything, this book is a version of the book where I, as a child, found all my answers and all my questions. You guessed it: the most sacred of tomes, *The Monster at the End*

*of This Book*, starring Grover (the Muppet, not the U.S. president). Lovable, furry old Grover. Blue. Fuchsia nose. Scatterbrained. Sometimes Super. Here's the plot: Grover shows up, reads the title, realizes there's a monster at the end of the book, and then asks you, the reader, not to continue reading, so as not to bring him face-to-face with the thing that he fears.

"Listen, I have an idea," he says to us on page two, breaking the fourth wall like he's in a midnight screening of *Rocky Horror*. "If you do not turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book. And that is good, because there is a Monster at the end of this book. So please do not turn the page."

*\*flip\**

"YOU TURNED THE PAGE!" he screams. So much is already happening.

Grover's horror escalates with every page turn, eventually getting to the point where he is futilely building a wall, putting up caution tape, pleading with you. Pitilessly, you persist. By the end of the book, Grover is in full hysterics.

But then we turn the last page, and Grover realizes that the monster at the end of the book is himself.

*Stunning*. He is the Keyser Söze of Muppets. And that's the book.

This book is meta as *hell*. It's like Borges for toddlers. Who does this? Also, this book is terrifying. It's psychological torture. *Gone Girl* for Muppets.

When I read it as a child, I didn't *want* to turn the page. I didn't want to torture Grover. I wonder if there's ever been a child who, when asked not to continue, simply closed the book and went on with their life. I want to know that obedient child. But the book's success is predicated on the assumption that we will not heed his simple request.

That is terrible. And I think that's why I like this book so much. I am Grover. I walk with him every step of the way on his journey. *The Monster at the End of This Book* is a lighthearted book about anxiety—anxiety about being confronted with the kind of person you really are (LOL!), anxiety about the inevitable passage of time (LOL), anxiety about being trapped by forces beyond your control (lol), anxiety about a deep, dreadful uncertainty ( . . . meep). Even when I read it for the first time at age three, I got that.

I was an anxious, though immaculately conceived, child. And an anxious, square, pious preteen. And an anxious half-zealot/half-gay teen. And an anxious, aimless young adult careening toward this moment. I'm anxious right now, actually, come to think of it. I'll definitely be an anxious dad. I'm sure I'll be an anxious old man, and I'll probably end up lying in my grave going, "Ugh, I feel like there's something I should be doing right now. I wonder if everyone is angry at me. Oh my God, how long is this going to take? And what happens next?"

Grover, too, is struggling. He is using every tool at his disposal to keep the thing that he fears the most at bay, and that thing is himself. He is almost crippled by his own fear. But he is still trying. Grover is the Willy Loman of Sesame Street.

On the internet, I play more of an Elmo than a Grover: I write funny columns, most visibly for ELLE.com; I make jokes about the news on Twitter; sometimes I write plays about social justice that have the audacity to end happily. I try to take what's dark about the world and shake out the satirical and the silly.

Everybody loves Elmo, right? Elmo is a closer. Elmo gets all the Glengarry leads. Elmo stares into the abyss and the abyss whispers, "Tickle me." But in real life, I'm a Grover. I have always been black in a white environment, not black enough in a black environment, working-

class in an upper-class environment, Christian in a secular environment, questioning in a devout environment, gay in a straight environment. Never quite right.

I grew up a little ball of potential (but oblivious) gay energy in a Baptist family from a black Baltimore neighborhood where there were more abandoned houses than lived-in ones. My parents sent me to school in a rich suburb where most of my classmates were white. Every moment from then on, I was an Other. The thing is, I felt it, but I didn't realize it.

Other felt like a funhouse narrative; it felt like doing something wrong. Or worse, being something wrong. So I ignored it for as long as I could, creating certainty where I could. And when that didn't work, I anxiously awaited a spoiler to burst through time and let me know if this whole thing was going to end badly.

That, for a while, seemed like life. And if I was really being honest with myself, I wasn't into it. The only option was to sit in the pews every Sunday at church and casually wonder if I was going to go to hell because of who I was? No, thank you. Or to understand that the structures on which the country was built were engineered against me? Hard pass. What choice did I have besides constantly code-switching between identities as a means of hiding in plain sight? And wasn't it just normal to feel like such a mistake as an adult that every time I walked over a bridge or stood on a subway platform, I had to talk myself out of stepping over the edge? I came to believe I was a monster and that I deserved to feel the way I felt. And I didn't want to turn the page.

But through it all there was a constant tethering me to the idea of a future: the library. The library is the place where I could borrow first Grover's philosophical tome, then a couple of Choose Your Own Adventures I could cheat at, and later a stack of mysteries I could spoil for myself, all attempts to look for some other way of understanding who I was.

In the book stacks, I found *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* and *Giovanni's Room* and David Rakoff's *Fraud* and more. I saw a new vision of Otherness in those books, and the pages kept turning. At the end of every one was a wall waiting to be broken down—a lurch toward becoming—a new paragraph in a story with an ending far different from what I'd ever dared imagine. Every story, whether truth or fiction, is an invitation to imagination, but even more so, it's an invitation to empathy. The storyteller says, "I am here. Does it matter?" The words that I found in these books were a person calling out from a page, "I am worthy of being heard and you are worthy of hearing my story." It seems simple but it's a bold declaration. How many times in life do we receive the message, implicit or explicit, that what we've experienced or what we feel isn't noteworthy or remarkable? The books that I found in the library, ones that I deeply understood and ones that seemed so outside of my experience they might as well have been written in Klingon, all carried the same hopes: to be seen, to be heard, to exist.

Hope is tricky, however, when what's waiting at the conclusion is monstrous, literally or figuratively. You can declare your own worthiness to the world, but that doesn't always mean you believe it yourself. There's a Nayyirah Waheed quote: "If someone does not want me, it is not the end of the world. But if I do not want me, the world is nothing but endings." That is the problem that troubles this book. "Listen, I have an idea," Grover says. "If you do not turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book." And yet . . .

I'm a spoiler kween; I'll see you at the end.

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