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# **THE HORROR OF DONNA BERZATTO AND HER FEAST OF THE SEVEN FISHES**

**BY VINCE A. LIAGUNO**

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LIKE many who watched the bravura sixth episode of *The Bear’s* second season, I was taken in by the exquisite writing, the sublime choreography of the acting ensemble, and, of course, positively blown away by the award-worthy performance of Jamie Lee Curtis as the Berzatto family matriarch. And, like many who watched that episode, I was struck by how well the writers and actors captured the damage and dysfunction of unchecked mental illness.

But that episode “Fishes” also brought me—a 55-year-old gay man who grew up in suburban New Jersey in the ’70s and ’80s—an unexpected, very personal gift: the clarity of perspective.

Like many artists, I’ve felt like a misfit my entire life. That sense of disconnection was strong from as early an age as I can remember being an adopted kid with an impossible-to-pronounce ethnic last name. A gay kid who liked the wrong type of music, wore the wrong kinds of clothes, and liked comic books and horror movies. Yep, that was me—the adopted gay comic book nerd with the Filipino-Italian last name. Parochial elementary school, followed by parochial high school, was about as bad for me as one would expect with its requisite bullying, a mortal fear of gym class, and the forced dating of the opposite sex (redheads were a thing even back then) to remain as low on my detractors’ radar as possible. Add in some religious dogma about burning in Hell for liking boys and you had the makings of an anxiety-ridden thirteen-year prison sentence.

As bad as school was, however, home was worse.

I grew up in suburban middle-class New Jersey—first the town of Edison, then the township of Hillsborough. To the casual observer, my life was that of the quintessential Generation X-er with a cable box and VCR on top of the console television, a hi-fi stereo and vinyl albums stacked in colorful plastic milk crates in my room, posters of Olivia Newton-John then Laura Branigan and then Madonna adorning the walls, and a key under the front doormat to let myself in from school before one of my two working parents got home from thankless jobs. Summers seemed endless—stretching from mid-June until early September and populated with long days of unsupervised activity that lasted until the first streetlight came on. Miles-long bike rides into neighboring towns to the comic book shop or down dirt

roads to explore abandoned buildings. Excursions into wide sewer pipes or through construction sites. Swimming at the homes of friends with wealthier parents and their own pools or friends who lived more modestly in condominium complexes with shared pools. Sleepovers in tents erected in the backyard and sleepless nights telling ghost stories by flashlight. Our fears were predicated on killer sharks, murderous grizzlies, Bigfoot, and UFOs.

My fears included a mother who, in hindsight, suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness—likely bipolar disorder. My earliest memory of this alternate version of my mother is from the age of five or six. It was a warm summer day, and I was playing outside. Maybe I was too loud, maybe I was too rough with a toy—I can't recall the exact precipitating factor—but I recall a darkness coming over my mother as she hauled me inside. I remember her pulling a suitcase out of the front hall closet and dragging it with one hand, me with the other, down the hallway to my childhood bedroom. I remember her breathlessly raging about what a bad boy I was and how I should be grateful that someone wanted me in this world as she opened drawer after drawer and threw my clothing into the suitcase. When it was packed, she made me lug in back down the hallway where she was now standing, pretending to make a phone call.

*"Hello? Yes, adoption people? This is Mrs. Liaguno, Vince's mom. Yeah, I'm sorry but he's been a horrible kid. He doesn't listen and does what he wants. He's just an awful little boy. No, I'm sorry—we want to give him back. How soon can you come pick him up? Fifteen minutes? Okay, he'll be out on the porch, waiting."*

To this day, I would love to know what any of the neighbors on Lincoln Avenue in Edison, New Jersey, thought, watching little five- or six-year-old me crying on that porch, banging on the metal screen door—suitcase bigger than me beside me—begging my mother not to send me back. Whatever they thought, it was the mid-1970s and everyone minded their business—even when it came to blatant child abuse.

As I got older and heard her car pull into the driveway, my stomach instinctively knotted, my bowels clenched. You never knew who would walk through the door—and, as the only child in our household, the sole recipient of whoever that was and whatever mood she was in was me. On rare days, I was greeted by a beautiful woman whose smile could light up the room, a woman who showered kind words and oozed love. A woman who was a talented seamstress who would make her own fashionable clothes and liked to fill our house with antiques. More frequently, I would be met with an angry woman with a scowl who would slam the door and tell me that I hadn't thoroughly weeded the flower beds or that I'd turned the outside light on too early, demanding to know the answer to her rhetorical question of whether or not I thought my parents were made of money and reminding me of how much parochial school cost and how hard she worked to pay the tuition.

When I was confronted with this version of my mother, I'd silently take stock of the list of chores I was supposed to have done that day, sometimes suddenly panic-stricken with the thought that I had pre-heated the oven to 375 degrees instead of 350. Or that I'd forgotten to dust under a row of her decorative mice figurines in the living room. Or that she'd think the wood I'd brought inside for the fireplace was stacked sloppily. On any given afternoon, there were 101 things I could have done shoddily in her opinion or forgotten to do at all. And all would earn me some kind of punishment, depending upon the depth of her dark side that day. Penance doled out by my mother could range from missing a favorite TV show to an open-handed slap across the face—with anything and everything in between.

My worst memory of the dark passenger who weighed my mother down was on the

day—I can't remember the month or time of year or anything else about that day—when I accidentally left the dryer door open, and my mother banged her knee on it. I knew from the cadence of her bellow from the laundry room that this most recent transgression had risen to a new level; but as I got up from the floor of my room where I'd been writing a story in my sticker-covered notebook, I didn't know just how bad her retribution would be. I was already diaphoretic and shaking as I walked toward the laundry room.

Before I even reached the laundry room, my mother was in the hallway, grabbing me under the forearm and pulling me toward the kitchen where she pushed me down on the slate floor. "*You can't remember a simple thing like closing the dryer door? You can't be bothered to make sure your own mother doesn't get hurt after working all day? Ok, mister, we're going to make sure you remember!*" she screamed before leaving me shaken and about ready to soil myself on the kitchen floor. My young mind couldn't scramble fast enough to imagine what horror she was going to inflict upon me, my mind eventually settling upon one of my father's wide belts that she used on occasion when she was driven to a particular level of physical violence. But when she came back up the hall and turned the corner to where I cowered on the kitchen floor, it was worse—so much worse. The worst thing in the world to my nine-year-old self: in her hands, she carried my box of beloved comic books. Before she even began to rip the first one down the middle, I knew it was coming.

Time has a funny way of dulling memories around the edges, so I can't say for sure how long it took my mother to methodically shred each of my approximate 150 comic books while I screamed and howled and begged on the floor beneath where she stood, but I can still remember the anguish I felt watching her destroy what had taken my little boy self a lifetime to amass. It hurt me in an irrevocable way that haunts me to this day. The only detail I remember is that my father walked through the door from work as she ripped the last one—*Justice League* #124—in half. His face, when he saw me sitting on the floor, sobbing, among the technicolor tatters of my cherished comic books, changed to a deep crimson color I had never seen before or since. He ushered her into the master bedroom at the other end of our modest ranch and the two of them argued for an hour. Eventually, the bedroom door opened, and my mother stormed out of the house. My father, speechless, could only tousle my hair and help me pick up the discards of a hobby I never revisited.

After the comic book incident, I turned to horror for escape. To the casual eye, horror might seem an odd genre choice in which to seek respite from the real-life terrors that plagued me; but, as the diehard genre aficionados know, horror is less its own self-contained genre and more a range of emotions. Writer and editor Douglas E. Winter first posited this now-popular construct in his introduction to the anthology *Prime Evil* (1988): "Horror is not a genre like the Mystery or Science Fiction or the Western . . . Horror is an emotion."

Horror gave this abused outcast kid a safe outlet through which to process a myriad of very adult emotions—betrayal, insecurity, anger, sadness, worry, stress, hopelessness, confusion, panic, self-loathing, and—yes—fear. Scary movies and books transported me—usually—to somewhere far worse and more horrifying than my actual life. I could follow the characters and experience their own fear from a safe distance. Horror became a guide through my own nightmare world, but—since it was a world in which I entered by my own free will—I was in control there, unlike my real life. Too scary? I could get up and leave the movie theater—as I did three times trying to get through *Jaws* at age eight—or close the book any time I wanted to. I could *manage* the horror, choosing to read that really scary passage in Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* or Richard Laymon's *The Cellar* during the daytime. I could

brave the summer camp carnage of *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* with a group of my friends, finding strength in adolescent camaraderie, instead of alone.

There seemed to be one constant presence in those early days of my budding horror fandom, one that took the form of a kindly babysitter the first time I met her onscreen. There was no greater joy in those pre-internet days than opening the arts and leisure section of the Sunday newspaper and spotting an ad for a new horror film with Jamie Lee Curtis' name in the credits. In her many onscreen horror incarnations during the late '70s and early '80s—from the high school prom queen battling bullies and axe-wielding siblings in *Prom Night* to the hapless hitchhiker who stumbles into Antonio Bay just in time for some mist-enshrouded ghostly vengeance in *The Fog*—Curtis became for me a surrogate sister. There was something about the way her Laurie Strode stood behind Tommy Doyle with protective hands on his shoulders in *Halloween* or her reluctant train-traveler Alana character in *Terror Train* confessed that she was going to miss her bestie Mitchy when they went off to college and that she loved her that struck a chord and filled some kind of maternal hole in my heart. Best of all, my mother could do nothing to destroy this kinship—dare I say, *relationship*—that I'd built in my head and heart with my cinematic scream queen.

Today, with the benefits of distance and perspective that time grants even the worst experiences in our lives, I believe this strong bond to horror—and, in particular, Curtis—was a post-traumatic response to my childhood abuse. In short, both saved me—from myself and the likelihood of spiraling down the cyclical rabbit hole of abuse to which so many victims succumb. Horror gave me a clarity of perspective and a mechanism through which I could process and compartmentalize the things my mother said and did to me. Curtis was a beacon, a comforting presence in the storm that was my mother that raged and pummeled the shoreline of my existence. That I'm fiercely loyal to them both, still today, is not a surprise in the least. Much in the same way Curtis predicts matter-of-factly that when she dies the headline will be "*Halloween Actress Dies*," my own obituary heading could easily end up being "*Biggest Jamie Lee Curtis Fan Dies*."

When my parents finally divorced in 1985, I was nothing but relieved watching my mother walk out the front door with her suitcase and a Benson & Hedges in her hand. She never looked back; I wish I could say the same.

Even at the age of sixteen, before the gift of therapy many years later, I knew enough to cut myself off from my mother at that point. It wasn't a vengeful or spiteful act; it was simply self-defense. After the death of my grandfather about ten years later, I wrote her a long letter expressing how I felt for all the mistreatment she'd inflicted—still leaving a door open to her—but she never responded. Years, then decades, passed. Finally, in 2017, I learned that she had died. This information came via the divorce courts that handled my father's alimony payments, so the details were scant. I did a little digging and requested information through New York State Vital Records. When I got home from work one night, I received a UPS delivery—a copy of my mother's death certificate. She apparently died in September of 2015, shortly after my fiancé and I had moved to Michigan.

As you can imagine, this came as a shock. Although I hadn't had any contact with my mother in the many, many years since she left my father and me when I was 16, the idea that a mother could die and the only child—technically, the next of kin—would not be at least notified was a bit of a blow. I felt a peculiar mix of unease, anger, and sadness all at the same time. To clarify, I wasn't sad because of the loss. I lost my mother decades ago—likely to an unspecified mental disorder—and I grieved the loss appropriately during the ensuing years.

I was sad because the last bit of information I'd ever know about her came from typed snippets on a death certificate, nuggets of impersonal data that begged more questions than provided answers. News of her death brought back a flood of memories from my childhood, and I was left feeling a bit sucker-punched in the aftermath. She left this life without so much as a nod in my direction. She was consistent, I'll grant you, and I gave her points for her maternal aggression right up until the end.

Flashforward to June of 2023. Like the rest of the fans of *The Bear*, I was surprised to discover that Curtis and several other high-profile actors had secretly filmed roles for the hit show's sophomore season. For the uninitiated, *The Bear* follows the character of Carmen "Carry" Berzatto, a talented young chef who leaves a prestigious gig working in a Michelin-star restaurant and returns home to Chicago after he inherits an Italian beef sandwich shop following his older brother's suicide. The show follows Carry's travails as he struggles to manage the failing, debt-ridden eatery and its rowdy and unpolished staff while trying to process his grief and—as the audience learns in the second season—family trauma.

Although the show is billed as a dramedy, its "Fishes" episode is pure horror, marked by a steadily escalating sense of dread and tension as its 66-minute running time ticks by. In the flashback episode, we're given a glimpse into Carry's family life as he returns home from Copenhagen where he's been training as a chef to spend Christmas with his family and friends. Before we even meet the character of Donna Berzatto, it's foreshadowed in a scene with Carry and his siblings Michael and Natalie that the alcoholic and volatile matriarch does not like to be asked about her mental state. We hear snippets of Curtis in the background before we see her, shouting out commands and admonishments over the Christmas music and boisterous family banter. When she appears onscreen, it's at first jarring. With flecks of food in her disheveled bronde hair, she's hastily buttering a thick slice of bread with her red-tipped fingers. She's the embodiment of pure chaos, frenziedly reacting to a multitude of kitchen timers, alternately taking drags of her cigarette and swigging glasses of wine while attempting to prepare the traditional Italian feast of seven fishes.

As I watched the episode, I realized that my stomach was clenched, and I was becoming increasingly anxious as Curtis' unhinged matriarch emotionally swerves and pivots—screaming profanities one minute before dissolving into a pile of giggles on the kitchen floor the next. The pendulum swing of her inner turmoil smacked me so suddenly that I forgot to breathe. Breathlessly, I watched as she emotionally abuses her daughter—then son—one minute before veering toward vulnerability as she pitifully scrabbles for some semblance of composure in the next. After running an unrestrained emotional gamut—from cursing her dinner guests and expressing suicidal ideation to smashing dishes and (literally) running her car through the living room wall—it's clear that Curtis' character is the family's nucleus of conflict and core source of trauma. And then it hit me, full-on, like a locomotive: I was watching my own mother. The flood of memories was swift and overpowering, washing over me with an amalgamation of all those deep-rooted feelings from my childhood that I'd worked through for years and years in the controlled setting of horror—the gnawing sense of anxiety, the anticipation of the jump scare, the flinch from the violence, the momentary reprieve before the next wave of attack.

There was so much to unpack. By the time Donna tells Carry, "I make things beautiful for them, and no one makes things beautiful for me," you're not sure whether you're watching an exhausted mother at her most exposed or a mentally unwell woman being psychologically manipulative—or some combination of both. Curtis appears again near the

end of the season's final episode—now back to present day—outside the renovated, upscale eatery Carmy and crew have worked all season to open. She's shown up for her kids on their big night—perhaps indicative that she's sought and received some mental help in the ensuing years—but can't bring herself to go in. In a scene of exquisite heartbreak, she tearfully admits to her son-in-law that she doesn't know how to express love or apologize for past transgressions. But when she says "I don't deserve to see how good this is. I want them to have this good thing and I don't want to hurt it," I broke down into gut-wrenching sobs.

I realized in that moment of immense and sudden clarity the true tragedy of my own mother's mental illness—her inability (and *not* willful unwillingness) to function in any way other than dysfunction. In that one onscreen moment, those two sentences flooded me with an empathy and profound sense of sadness for my mother that I don't think I'd ever felt before. After decades of self-defense and rightful resentment for the admittedly horrible things she did to me, I suddenly saw her through another set of eyes. That this uncanny depiction would be gifted to me by the same actress who once saved me as a young boy on the cusp of adolescence and brought me a sense of comfort through her presence in the horror films I loved as a kid was not lost on me in the least. It was as full circle a moment as I think I've ever experienced.

As I've now started to understand that my mother was as much a victim of her mental illness as I and those around her were, I've begun the long process of reshaping and reframing our relationship. The purpose of this self-reflective exercise isn't to deny, dilute, or even to forgive; it's to understand. Or at least to try to.

I have always thought of my mother as a monster—and it's very likely that I always will. She was scary and did monstrous things. She inflicted hurt through physical and emotional violence that caused lasting damage. There is simply no other way for my child-self to process and wrap my mind around her actions. But the horror of an episode of *The Bear* and Jamie Lee Curtis have thrown me yet another life preserver: the gift of the clarity of perspective. I can choose to view the horror through the POV of the monster itself without fearing the danger of excusing the inexcusable. Having sympathy for the devil doesn't mean you overlook the devil's deeds. If my mother was a monster, she was a monster of circumstance, not by design.

Sitting here now, a mature, relatively healthy, happy man in his mid-fifties, I wish my mother had found something to save her, some lifesaver to latch onto. I know horror threw me a lifesaver and Jamie Lee Curtis hauled me up and out of the turbulent waters to safety. I'm sorry my mother drowned in some combination of brain chemistry, genetics, life experiences, and environmental stressors. I'm sorry she lived in a time when help for mental illness wasn't readily available or when admitting such carried such a shameful stigma.

I'm sorry the monsters that saved me couldn't do the same for her.

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