



Day of Remembrance

Ace Boggess

I'd forgotten it was the fifth anniversary until I saw the crowds on TV as I eased into my jeans. Many gatherings commemorated this day of mourning. Men locked arms and wept, suffering horror and loss again five years after the suicides. They marked time to the minute it started, when all the women killed themselves—not *literally* all the women, but enough that a phrase like 'all the women' could slip into our vocabulary, substituting for the reading of names which more commonly followed tragedies.

"Turn that off," Garrett said. "I don't want to watch."

I grunted, but acquiesced and hit the red button on the remote.

Before the screen went black, I heard a commentator mention Jan Arlen, the instigator. It began with her social-media call for a sort of flash-mob event. She wanted women to do themselves in as a silent protest against injustices they suffered: physical, sexual, emotional. She meant it as a way to emulate Buddhist monks setting themselves on fire to protest the war in Vietnam. In her suicide note, she wrote that if two hundred women followed through with the act, it could change the world. Had she survived the noose she wove for herself with purple yarn, she would've learned that the actual number approached two hundred thousand. That was the count of women in the U.S. who died. More lay in vegetative states in wards set up to contain them, not including the conscious ones who had their faces scraped off ceilings or lost their legs instead of their lives when they jumped in front of subway trains and missed.

The deaths didn't stop at our borders. Great Britain claimed thirty thousand bodies, half that in Germany and France. Russian media announced seven thousand dead, although talking heads on CNN estimated the number could be off by a multiple of more than ten. Deaths throughout the Middle East remained uncountable.

"I hate this shit," Garrett said as he fumbled with the buttons on his sky-blue shirt. "I feel like a mouse stuck in a glue trap."

I wasn't sure what he meant. My face flushed, warmth bringing out the sweet vanilla scent of his wife's perfume. "I'm...what?" Words wouldn't come.

"This garbage. Do we really need people holding hands and singing hymns?"

"They want to remember..."

"As if we'd ever *forget*," he said, "if folks shut the fuck up and went on with their lives." He pounded the mattress with both fists. If Jan Arlen saw him sitting there, witnessed the fresh rage twisting his black eyebrows into lazy S's or fashioning veins in his neck into their own sort of noose, she'd have known she succeeded. The indentations at his temples pulsed like jellyfish. His sloping forehead turned the red of autumn leaves.

Not knowing how to comfort him, I nodded, though he didn't see. Then I bent down to retrieve the flowery spring dress which I balled up and stuffed into my duffel bag.

"Ray," he said, after a tense silence and a few deep breaths, "I miss her."

"I know you do, man. I know you do."

Garrett swore his wife Michelle never showed any sign of unhappiness. She was a tiny woman with wavy brown hair that she kept in a ponytail so it didn't fall over her eyes while she was checking a pulse or installing an IV port in a patient's forearm. Whenever I saw her, she either had gotten off work and wore blue hospital scrubs that stank of disinfectant or had just woken up and sported a fuzzy gray terrycloth bathrobe that smelled of vanilla and—I thought—a hint of weed. She laughed, grinned, and told me crazy stories from her job, keeping me entertained while I waited for Garrett to drive me to the office or drop me off at my apartment. Michelle was warm and polite. But I couldn't have known....

Even Garrett lacked the background information. About two years after she died, he drank too much Wild Turkey and, during a crying fit, confessed that Michelle never told him the things she said in her note: how one of her father's friends molested her when she was twelve, how her dad kicked her in the stomach for no reason other than meanness and booze, how a guy in college attempted to rape her and failed only because he tripped drunkenly over a chair, giving her time to flee her own dorm room. "She kept secrets," he mumbled. "She kept them from *me*."

I tried to soothe him, but I had no idea what to say. Who did? We lived in a world of uncomfortable silences punctuated by sad singing from street corners or coming out of open windows of dark houses.

Duffel slung over my back, I reached for the doorknob.

“Nnnn nnnn,” Garrett grunted.

I turned to look.

“Ray,” he said, and pointed at my head.

“Shit,” I said. “Thanks.” I had forgotten to take off the blond wig. I reached for it now, squeezing it as if I were strangling a rat, then struggled to stuff it into my bag.

“Much better,” he said. The silver flask came out of his back pocket and went to his lips. I hadn’t seen it yet today, but I knew it was there. It was *always* there. He kept it handy as if it were an epinephrine shot for his allergy to self-pity.

“Same time next week?” I said.

“Sure,” he coughed. “Your turn.”

Garrett and I didn’t know how to live this life. That is, we figured out the physical parts, but got lost thinking about how we should act after. We talked a lot less these days, and the words we spoke weren’t joyous. We didn’t act like lovers. We didn’t flatter each other or trade gifts. We never discussed the sex itself—the rawness of it, the awkwardness, the leftover oily stink of lubrication. He didn’t ask about my day, and I didn’t chastise him for drinking. We were prostitutes fulfilling a bargain. We met up once a week, then went on as though none of it happened. It was a physical thing, purely practical. Thousands of men made similar deals. The intent was pleasure, or at least release. After a while, though, it became something to hold until our circumstances changed. That was also part of the deal: if one of us found female companionship, our bargain ended with no complaints and no questions asked.

Not that it mattered. We weren’t likely candidates for love. Garrett had grown ugly from anger and grief. He drank too much. And, of course, he already claimed a wife among the suicides. That was a black mark on any dating profile. As for me, I brought my own baggage. Women found me too skinny or too short. Some mocked the L-shaped scar under my left eye, branded there by a car when I was a teen. Most women thought me unsettling in another way, although they couldn’t isolate it and give it a name. Even before Jan Arlen’s day of protest, I felt a distance from others. I dated. I had normal sexual encounters. I made it more than a year in a couple pf relationships. But I remained absent as if I played this role even then.

Michelle’s story wasn’t unique. Thousands of the suicides came without anyone having known their causes beforehand—at least, without anyone willing to admit it. Wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends of friends—many kept their distresses to themselves, revealing these only in a last litany of sorrow and outrage, along with a bullet, razor, or massive dose of pills.

I logged off Facebook, Instagram, and X for months because I couldn’t handle reading the stories anymore. Everyone knew someone who had gone through with it. It was just like how every family had a junkie or a convict in it, but those things weren’t broadcast to the world. The suicides were international topics, blocking all other news. They halted work, nearly shut down the government, and paused wars for a while.

I read about a ninety-year-old great-grandmother who kept secret for seven decades how her late husband raped her when the two first met. She jumped from a bridge to punish him, despite the fact he lay underground for longer than the two were married.

Then there was the nine-year-old known on social media by the pseudonym Mary Alice. She might have been an urban legend for all I knew, but Mary Alice's story went viral. She attempted (no more, at least) to end her life by swallowing an entire bottle's worth of chewable vitamins because she had told her story about an abusive teacher but no one believed her.

And how could I forget the story of Ashley L.? She streamed her death live, but not until she named the twenty-four separate men she said had sexually assaulted her. She was twenty-three when she stuck her father's Smith and Wesson in her mouth.

Those were the extremes. Outliers. Most of the suicides shared perfectly common stories about rapes, molestations, harassment, and groping. Spousal abuse came up often. There were occasional tales of forced abortions and a few examples of commitment to a mental institution, which was something I thought only happened in old movies.

I logged out of every network to avoid stories like that. The web might as well have held real spiders.

Garrett watched through the motel window, peeking past a crack in the blinds until I made it to the Plexiglas shelter of the bus stop. I didn't turn to look, but I knew he was there, staring. I felt his eyes like breath on my neck.

Not just *his* eyes. Days like this—Garrett's days—I imagined everyone looking at me as if I had left the room naked. Did I move differently? Did I stink of vanilla and sex? I grew more self-conscious with every step. People were observing me. Judging.

A ridiculous thought.

Why? Maybe it was the awkwardness, although after a few years, even *that* seemed ordinary. Or maybe it was Garrett's eyes following me. Our rituals embarrassed him, too. He never left the room until the silver bus closed its doors and pulled away. We were victims of our insecurities. On this day of remembrance, how much worse they were.

I didn't have a wife or girlfriend when Arlen's hour arrived. I kept to myself for the most part, heading to the office five days a week to hide in my cubicle. I served my time as a minor customer-service rep for a satellite-TV company. Garrett worked there, too, as a department manager. He wore glittery sweaters and gold chains in those days, whereas I slumped back in my usual tee and jeans. Garrett helped me get that job as a short-term life fix when I graduated. I didn't expect to stay with the company for a decade.

When Arlen triggered her social bomb, I was in upstate New York to interview for a bank job more suited to my degree in economics. I paid for my own plane ticket (credit card, return-trip, coach), used up two days' vacation time, and wasted money on the sharpest summer suit I could afford (seersucker, Sears). I walked through the main doors with head high and eyes

forward as I strained not to slouch while standing. I marched past the row of tellers and the island of deposit slips, heading toward the branch manager's office, where I told the woman's receptionist, "Ray Littleton, here to see Ms. Vance."

The receptionist, a slender but lanky woman in a flowery blouse, had dark hair, dark lips, and dark eyes which looked to be fighting back dark, dark tears. She motioned for me to have a seat, which I did. "Just a minute," she said, a shriek in her voice like ripping paper. I watched as she stood and left the desk, almost jogging—not toward the closed office door behind her, but past me back into the main part of the bank.

I nodded and stared up at the burgundy and gold strip atop the beige wallpaper. I fixated on a cobweb in one high corner. It was billowy and nebulous, a bit hypnotizing like a lava lamp. Twenty minutes passed, and still I sat there, oblivious to what horrors went on in the world around me. I started checking my watch every few seconds. *Calm down*, I thought, enforcing the notion with some difficulty. My nerves caused spasms in my neck.

After another few minutes, I braved a look around the corner of the wall behind me. I saw the receptionist standing off to one side of the ticket island. She cried and waved her arms as she spoke to two thin, blond, red-faced men. Tuning out the rest of the bank's noise, I listened, picking up a couple words here and there: "...tell him...go home...I don't...could she..." Then one of the blond men spoke, and I clearly heard the word 'suicide.'

I rode the bus into town, thinking I might catch a movie or walk around the mall like I used to when I was a teenager. I needed a distraction—something to redirect my thoughts. Instead, the bus stalled in traffic, moving a few feet at a time. Mourners and marchers blocked roads, wandering among vehicles. I watched through the window as a large, gray-bearded man flipped off the bus driver who I heard cussing so much he could've been recording an album. Other men pounded fists against the steel hull as they passed. Sorrow was turning to anger as it always did.

Not wanting to merge with these people, I kept seated, alone with my thoughts. I shook my head often and marveled at how awful the world had become. Or maybe 'become' was the wrong word. The mask had been ripped away, and we could see ugly faces underneath. Now, things that should feel good felt bad, and every intimacy seemed like an attack. Saying hello to a stranger left me with a sense it could end in a fistfight.

"Goddamned sons of bitches!" the bus driver shouted.

I didn't look out the window to see which men he meant.

Despite the failed interview, my job situation improved after the suicides. I'm ashamed to admit I benefited from the horror. Within a week, I received a promotion to floor manager. Then, a spot opened up as a manager in the Spanish-language department, which blew my mind, seeing as I knew barely enough Spanish to say hello, ask for a name, and order a beer. I did that job for a couple months until the next pay bump when I was named Vice President of Regional Customer Service for Latin America. That job, as specific as it sounded, required no Spanish

speaking whatsoever. I oversaw bilingual college-age coders and telephone jockeys, then spent the rest of my day playing computer solitaire in my office down the hall from Garrett's.

After an hour, the bus made it two miles to the mall. Most passengers exited, happy to be freed from blue-gray walls of this prison cell. I stayed in my seat, no longer feeling like shopping or walking or anything else that involved being part of the crowd. I decided to ride the rest of the way to the transit mall, then catch another bus across town to my apartment.

While we were stopped, a woman came on, flashed her bus pass, and headed down the aisle. She walked by many empty seats, choosing the one right across from me. She was fit and sharply dressed in earth tones (tee shirt, skirt) that didn't fit with her dyed black hair. She wore no makeup, and her fingernails were bare. As she raised her iPhone and scanned through Instagram, I spotted the little black heart tattooed on the web beneath her left thumb: a familiar symbol, another protest. It meant she understood why other women did what they did, and maybe she felt the same things, but for whatever reason she hadn't followed through.

I saw those black hearts too often on the hands of strangers in supermarkets, interviewees on the local news, or an occasional coworker whose name I didn't know because she was new to the job and likely wouldn't be there long. Sighting another black set a somber tone for any encounter, making every day a day of remembrance.

Coming to my senses, I looked away. I dug out my phone and checked the time, my Gmail account (empty), the time again, and finally the game I had been playing which involved a fictional me doing fictional-me things like microwaving a burrito, watching boring TV shows, and staring out a window at the fictional world outside. I wanted fictional-me to go out into that world and find a fictional girlfriend. In the fictional world, there were plenty of fictional women to fall in love with fictional men like fictional-me. But that hadn't happened. I was too detached, even in the game.

"Excuse me," the woman said.

I startled as if from a daze, shutting off my phone and turning to look at her.

"Excuse me," she said again. Her voice was soft and deep. It made me think of infomercials.

"Yes?"

"Don't take this the wrong way," she said. "I ask everybody this right off the bat."

"Okay." I wasn't sure what else to say.

"I mean, please don't be offended."

"I'll try," I assured her. "What is it?"

"Are you a monster?"

The question punched me in the gut like a fist wrapped in steel.

I had been lucky, I guess. Other than Garrett's wife, one of my bosses, and a lady down the hall in my apartment building, I didn't know any of the suicides. Did that mean I wasn't to

blame? My name never appeared on lists or notes. I liked to think I wasn't responsible for any black hearts either, but how could I know?

From the litany of names on the Jan Arlen tribute webpage, only one belonged to a girl I used to date: Mindy Hammerlin. We were both fourteen. We went to a couple movies and ate pizza by the slice at the mall food court, each of us dabbing our mouths with napkins after every bite as if any stain of sauce might spoil our whole relationship. After our third date, she kissed me in the parking lot of a Target. I kissed her back clumsily as if my lips were made of stone. On our next date, she grabbed my wrist and forced my hand to her breast. One of us trembled, but I couldn't tell which. Finally, after one more flick and one more slice, she moved on to someone else. She never told me why.

I wondered if she thought of me before she killed herself. Was it possible that I bore some responsibility? Could I have been kinder to her? Did she resent our three weeks of movie tickets and slight, imperfect kisses? I doubted it. I suspect she barely remembered me, just as I had all but forgotten her until I saw her name among the lost.

"Are you a monster?"

I understood the question, but found no easy answer. After the aghast look dissolved from my face, I hesitated before replying. "I don't know," I said, staring at my chest as if scolded.

"Good," the black-hearted woman said. "That's the right response. What's your name?"

"Ray?" I said like a question, as if I weren't sure.

"I'm Dana." She held her hand across the aisle. Left hand, black heart.

I shook it with my left, straining to reach across my body.

"Nice to meet you. You come from the memorials?"

"No." I added no explanation.

"Glad to hear that, too."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but why?"

"Means you didn't lose anybody. Tells me a lot right there."

"Maybe I'm calloused and don't care."

"No, because you don't know if you're a monster. If you lost someone and didn't care, I think you'd have a pretty good idea."

"Guess so," I said.

"Here," she said, and began raising her skirt. It came up her left leg, baring a creamy thigh and the top of a beige garter. Unnerved, I almost looked away again, but spotted the stack of business cards tucked between skin and fabric. She removed one, handed it across to me, and smoothed her skirt back into place.

I glanced down at the card: *Dana Lovitz, The Church...* "You're a minister?" I said, before reading the last part: *...of Good Monsters*. "Oh," I said, choking on my question. "Uh..."

"In a sense," she said. "I'm more like a facilitator. We're a community group, sort of like an Al-Anon for men who want to share their sorrows and worries about how women are treated."

“I thought things were better,” I said, just to say something.

“No,” she replied. “Don’t get me wrong. There’s much less abusive behavior these days, because women won’t stand for it, and other men—the good monsters—won’t stand by and watch without speaking up. In some ways, though, the situation’s worse. The *real* monsters know they’re monsters now, and they can’t let themselves be exposed. They hide in shadows of their caves, alone and angry, and they hate us for it.”

The image made me think of Garrett. I wondered if there might be more to his story than he told me. I shook my head to clear that thought before it could lead me down dark alleys.

“Anyway, we meet three nights a week at First Baptist Church on Norwood Avenue. I lead the men in a few nondenominational prayers, then let them talk about their lives, loves, hopes, and fears. It’s all very...emotional. I’ll just say there’s hugging involved.”

“Why haven’t I heard of this?” I asked.

“I don’t know. There are chapters all over the country. All over the world. Are you on social media?”

“Not much,” I told her, “when I can help it.”

“Well, when you are, we have pages on all the sites. Look us up.” She smiled and nodded. “Better yet, come to a meeting. Be a good monster. It’s better than living in a cave.”

Was I one? A good monster? When I looked back at the women I had dated, I recalled how depressed they were, and how angry. I used to believe those types were drawn to me because I made them feel safe. I didn’t add to their burdens. Now, it occurred to me that maybe I didn’t attract depressed, angry women, but created them. Could there be something about me that unlocked a door behind which one found suffering? Isn’t a good monster still a monster?

Ace Boggess is author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Tell Us How to Live* (Fernwood Press, 2025) and *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* (Mōtus Audāx Press, 2025). His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His first short-story collection, *Always One Mistake*, was recently released from Running Wild Press.