HERE BE MONSTERS

Virtually free.

BY STEPHANIE ZVAN

Karee stuck her head into the windowless lab. “Doc?” Doctor Andrews stared at her screen, chewing a twisted strand of hair.

“Uh, Doc?”

“Oh!” Andrews started. “Is it time already?”

“Actually, I’m running late.”

“Right.” Doc Andrews stood up but kept watching the screen.

“Doc...”

“Sorry, sorry.” She turned. “It’s just that I might finally be there. If the lab in Sweden has duplicated my results, we may finally have a cure, even for the worst cases.”

“Really, Doc? That’s wonderful!” Karee’s voice rang in the concrete hallway. “No more muco-whatsis?”

“No more MPS.” Andrews laughed, a sound of pure joy. “No more sick babies. No more stunted bodies and minds. Just healthy children, beautiful and sound.” She licked her lower lip.

Despite her best effort, Karee twitched a little. She scratched her shoulder to cover it. “That’s great, Doc. Great.” It was wonderful news, but... They arrived at the doctor’s room, none too soon. “Here we are. Have you eaten?”

She often forgot.

“While I was waiting,” Andrews grabbed what looked like long underwear off the back of a chair and headed into the bathroom. A few minutes and some running water later, she was changed and back. She sat on her bed. “All set.”

The helmet always looked uncomfortable to Karee, bulky and claustrophobic, and the relish with which Andrews put it on didn’t make Karee any happier. She waited for Andrews to settle into her special pillow. A light on the helmet indicated everything was synching properly. Small power and data cables clipped onto the pyjamas. Gloves attached to the sleeves completed the outfit.

“You good, Doc?”

“Oh, yes.” Andrews gave a little wriggle of anticipation.

Karee swallowed. No getting used to that. “Good night, then.”

With the last of the inmates ‘shelved and synched’, she signed out using her passkey. Her ward was quiet, with the exception of the occasional low moan. Time to leave her charges to the night staff and rejoin society.

There was no good reason to wash her

hands at the end of her shift, but she always did. Her face too. The cool evening breeze found the spots around her ears she hadn’t quite dried. She shivered but felt much lighter than she had inside.

Then she saw the sign through the fence. Poster paper on a broom handle, it said simply: *Here be monsters*. It must be Thursday.

Theo was alone, as he always was these days. The year before, his wife, Hannah, had waded into the lake and swum out farther than she could swim back.

No one at the facility ever spoke to him, but everyone knew his story. Everyone knew about Hannah, and everyone knew about their son.

Claude was born the year the facility opened. Theo and Hannah weren’t protesting then, but plenty of others were. Sure, the paedophiles and compulsive sadists should be locked up, but using VR to give them what they wanted? Victimless as it was, it still felt wrong.

Karee understood. She did. But study after study had showed that no treatment was effective enough in changing inherently antisocial sexual orientations and that the stigma surrounding them only made people more likely to offend. Involuntary commitment after the fact couldn’t help the victims. Voluntary commitment with the

VR as incentive worked

despite its unpopularity.

The video interviews had at least made it acceptable. Doctor

Andrews had been one of the first interviewed, and Karee had transferred from maximum security to guarding voluntary commitment after seeing the look of relief on Andrews’s face. Here Karee could make a difference.

The difference hadn’t come in time for Claude. When the neighbour who raped and murdered him was found to be one of those organizing the local demonstrations, most of the remaining protests stopped. More people volunteered to be locked up. Claude’s death saved uncounted children, but it destroyed his parents. And when their neighbour was murdered in prison two years later, Claude’s family was left without any target for their anger except Karee’s facility.

So, here it was, Thursday again, and there stood Theo with his sign. He hefted it a little higher when Karee was buzzed through the gate, but he didn’t look at her. He never had, not once in the past five years.

Karee sighed, suddenly tired. Doc Andrews and the others were rewarded for making the world a safer place. They were happy. Why wasn’t she? The kids were taken care of, and so were the... well, the monsters who’d agreed not to threaten them. Everybody was taken care of, in fact, except her and...

Karee took a deep breath. “Hey, Theo?”

Startled, Theo looked at her for once. Karee had dreaded seeing anger or hate on his face, but the blankness there disturbed her more. It said he’d forgotten what his protest was supposed to accomplish. He looked terribly old.

Karee nodded up the street. “You’ve got to be just about done here, right? Want to get a cup of coffee?” Coffee seemed like such a simple, uncomplicated good thing, what she wanted more than anything else in the world right now.

The blankness stared back at her. Then Theo opened his mouth. It worked for a bit, no sound coming out, but confusion was an improvement. Karee realized they must be about the same age.

“Come on.” Karee motioned with her hand. “Coffee shop’s just on the corner. I’ll buy.”

Finally, Theo rested his sign against the fence and nodded. His smile was tentative, but it was a smile. As they walked away, Karee felt herself grinning for the first time in years. ■

Stephanie Zvan is a Minneapolis writer fascinated with the strains that science and society place on one another. She blogs on that and more at *Almost Diamonds*.

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Follow Futures on
Facebook at:
[go.nature.com/mtoodm](https://www.facebook.com/mtoodm)