

Episode 1: What's Happened? What do we Know?

Margaret: I want to begin by asking you to think back to when you were a kid. I want you to imagine that you're in your room, late at night, lying in bed in your pajamas. It's a warm night, maybe it's summertime, maybe you've got the window open, and you're just about to fall asleep, when suddenly—there's something—a new sound—coming from under your bed.

It's a strange sound, a noise you don't recognize, and you start to worry that it's something more than just a floorboard creaking, or the movements of your parents downstairs. You start to think it's something dangerous, or sinister. Something that might want to hurt you.

You hear the noise again and ask yourself: what is it? Can you look at it? Should you? And what will happen if you do?

I'm Margaret Saville for 1t's Alive: The Podcast.

Last month, an unidentified creature was discovered by a man jogging through a local park in Baltimore, Maryland. At first, the man thought, he was seeing a human, albeit a strange one who was sitting alone, on a bench, in the middle of a park on a Saturday morning. But when he moved closer to ask if the person needed assistance, he realized it wasn't a human he was seeing—at least, not quite. What he saw, the man claims, was a monster. He ran as fast as he could to report what he'd seen to police, but when authorities returned to examine the creature the man had described, they found nothing.

So. What exactly happened that day, in that park, in April?

I'm going to devote this episode to this question, to uncovering everything that's known for sure about that morning—what was seen and where, and when and by whom. I'll save the speculation on where the monster came from, where he is now, and why we care so much, for future episodes. For today, I simply want to know everything we can about the morning the creature was discovered.

If we're going to trace the origins of the monster's story, we're going to begin with the story of Robert Walton, a middle-aged man who runs—every morning—through the city of Baltimore, Maryland. As Rob explained to me in an interview, he's been running long distance for years, crossing over roads, and footpaths, and bridges before most of the world has even thought about brewing coffee.

It's so ingrained in Rob, at this point, that it doesn't ever occur to him to stay home, to miss a run, or even to run on a treadmill when the weather's bad. He runs, he told me, in rain or shine, sleet or snow, whether he's sick, or tired, or stressed, or anything else. He wakes up, and he runs.

So when he saw out his window on the morning of April 20, 2016, that it was rainy, and windy, and generally terrible outside, Robert Walton's first thought wasn't "okay, back to sleep." Instead, he simply thought, "I'll need a jacket."

Margaret: So that's it? That's really what you thought? I mean, I don't live in town, but I looked up the forecast for that day here and it just seemed terrible. High wind, and rain, and the trees blowing back and forth—

Robert: Yeah, yeah, it wasn't good.

Margaret: And there was thunder, right?

Robert: Yeah, definitely thunder.

Margaret: But you still knew you were going running...

Robert: Oh, absolutely. No question. Can't miss a run.

Margaret: The reason the details of Robert's morning are so important aren't just because they paint a portrait of someone dedicated to his morning run. They help us get to know the sole witness we have so far to the monster's existence, which helps us, in turn, decide whether he's credible.

Over the course of interviewing Rob, I have to say that I came to believe what he said. Although he's shy, and a bit of a loner—he's 47 years old and lives by himself, with no wife and no children—Robert Walton didn't strike me as someone that fabricates stories to get attention. He simply seemed like a guy who kept to himself, and really, really liked to run.

Margaret: So, okay, you get up, maybe had some coffee...

Robert: No, nothing like that. I just started running.

Margaret: Gotcha. Now I've read in the news that you didn't have a cell phone or anything on you, just a sports watch?

Robert: That's right.

Margaret: Which means you can only tell us...

Robert: *Right, about the time. I know I left my house at around 6:30. Still dark. Made my way through the first few miles, wind is howling all around and it's crazy, not another soul out there. Got onto the road around 7 and just went at it. Like usual.*

Margaret: *The road Robert's referring to is Franklinton Road, a path that cuts through Leakin Park in Baltimore. It's a well-known park, though in recent decades it's acquired a somewhat nefarious reputation—the bodies of murder victims are often dumped there, the most infamous of which was the body of Hae Min Lee, whose death was explored in season one of the Serial podcast. The park's bad reputation, in addition to the terrible weather, may be why Robert was alone there that day in April while he was running.*

Margaret: *At what point in the run did you first notice something was different?*

Robert: *4 miles into the road. Everything was on track, everything was normal, and then I hear this...this thing. This sound.*

Margaret: *And you're sure it wasn't thunder, like the rain or something?*

Robert: *No, no it was like...a song. But sadder. More like a wail.*

Margaret: *So what'd you do?*

Robert: *I followed the sound, and it was hard to find, you know, with the rain, but I did. I found it. I mean, I found the thing that was making it.*

Margaret: *Which was...*

Robert: *A monster.*

Margaret: *Describe it for me.*

Robert: *Well, it was hard to tell in the rain and everything, but it was definitely a monster. I mean it was huge. seven feet tall at least. And he was sort of curled, twisted...sitting, I guess, on this park bench. And like I said, just making this horrible, terrible sound, this wailing. It wasn't human.*

Margaret: *Did you see his face?*

Robert: *No, no, his face was hidden under a hood.*

Margaret: *But you're sure he was a monster.*

Robert: *Absolutely.*

Margaret: *If there is a point where I start to doubt Rob's story, this is it. It's not because what he says doesn't line up, or make some kind of sense, it's simply because it's so hard to imagine that he's so convinced of what he saw with so few details.*

Margaret: *Are you aware that there are...people who say your story is less than accurate? That it's impossible that what you saw was actually a monster?*

Robert: *I mean, I know those doubters are gonna say what they like, but it doesn't bother me. Not at all.*

Margaret: *And why's that?*

Robert: *I mean...I know I'm telling the truth. I know what I saw.*

Margaret: *If you listen to the few interview Robert's given since the creature was discovered, you'll find that he repeats this same line over and over again: I know what I saw. Reporters sometimes press him to elaborate, to describe in greater detail how he's so sure, how they're supposed to even trust his vision on a day that was so terrible. No matter how intense the questions get, though, Robert continues to stick to that line: I know what I saw.*

There is, however, one other detail that Robert isn't mentioning, something that both bolsters and complicates his account of what happened that morning. According to Rob, he ran as fast as he could to the police. They searched for hours, everywhere they could think of, but didn't see or hear any trace of the being that Robert described.

They did, however, find something else they'd been looking for, something they never expected to find in Leakin Park: several dozen journals, and notebooks, concealed inside plastic grocery bags. What makes the notebooks interesting isn't just their location, but their content: each one is filled with haphazard lab notes, and painstakingly drawings of human anatomy, as though they were written by a manic biology student. And—perhaps most notably—each notebook has the same name, written in messy, haphazard hand, in the front: Victor Frankenstein.

What makes this even more interesting is what we know about that name: it belongs to a former Johns Hopkins medical student who went missing over a year ago, and was presumed dead—likely a suicide—by police. These notebooks challenge that conclusion, and beg not only the question of whether he's still alive, but if so, of what he's been up to in this past year. They also ask us to reconsider who Victor really was, or really is: another isolated grad student who let the pressure of med school get to him? Or something, someone else entirely?

Tune in next week to hear more, and see what he might be able to tell us about the creature from Leakin Park.