

Episode 2: The Creature Freedom Movement

Margaret: *Welcome back to It's Alive: The Podcast. If this is your first time joining us, bello. In our last episode, we spoke with Rob Walton, the jogger from Baltimore, Maryland who became a local celebrity after discovering what he calls a "monster" in the woods of Baltimore's Leakin Park. Though police have yet to find this monster, they did find something else intriguing—a series of notebooks belonging to former Johns Hopkins medical student Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein attended Hopkins as an undergrad, and had just completed his first year of medical school there before he disappeared without a trace last year.*

Until now, that is. The discovery of Victor's notebooks reanimated the swirl of questions that surround his disappearance, putting some theories to rest while creating others: has Victor Frankenstein been living in the woods? Many suspect that Rob Walton's monster was none other than Victor Frankenstein himself, looking considerably worse for the wear after spending a year on the streets of Baltimore city and in Leakin Park. When I first heard this explanation, I thought it sounded like a plausible, if not entirely logical one, and for a few days, I wondered whether we'd already put the monster mystery to rest. I thought about there was even a need to continue this podcast, whether there was even a story to tell here.

But then, something happened.

It started as a single instagram photo, taken by local teenager Jayden Wade. Wade's been following the monster mystery since the beginning, he told me, along with his girlfriend Jazmine Imani. They've been looking at everything online they could find since Rob Walton's initial report. The teens were convinced there had to be more to the story than simply Victor Frankenstein, hiding out alone in Baltimore after disappearing from med school.

They wanted to see for themselves what the situation at the park was, and so one Wednesday night, Jayden and Jazmine snuck out to the park. I want to pause here, and note that my account of their evening comes from a phone interview I did with Jayden, though I'm unfortunately unable to play excerpts. After his visit to the park, he explained to me in a follow-up email, his parents grounded him "till eternity" and forbid him from appearing on our podcast to discuss what he saw. However, rest assured that all details I'm reporting came directly from Jayden himself.

According to Jayden, his and Jazmine's goal in visiting Leakin park was simple: to see if they might track down the monster, and talk to him, to prove for sure whether or not he was Victor Frankenstein. They spent the first few hours walking quietly, hitting one dead end after another: they'd hear a small noise, or even their own footsteps, and they'd be convinced for a second it really was the monster. It's been rainy, lately, at the park, and the ground beneath them felt damp, and soggy, which was frustrating. Plus, they only had iPhones that they were using as flashlights, making it difficult to avoid stepping in puddles, or snagging their jackets on tree branches.

It grew late—approaching 1 am—and also colder in the park. They decided to call off their search, and head home. They went back out the way they came, and were nearing the entrance when they heard a new noise: something rustling

its way through the trees. At first, they thought they'd found it—the monster—but as they listened they realized it was something else. The rustling grew louder, and diffused, as though it wasn't one thing moving through the trees, but many. And then there was talking, soft voices that Jayden and Jazmine couldn't quite discern. And then the biggest clue of all: a loud, crunching noise of something heavy being moved across the ground of the park, right near them.

In that moment, Jayden told me, he felt frozen. He'd come all this way to find something exactly like this, but he was paralyzed, and unable to move. Jazmine, however took action: she ran forward towards the sound, and Jayden, instinctively, followed her.

In a couple seconds, the pair reached the entrance to the park, and saw a sight neither of them was prepared for: a large but thin body, concealed by a straitjacket and surrounded by a team of men and women in dark clothing. The team was struggling to hold down the creature in the straitjacket and load it into a large, white van, which was plain save for some telltale lettering on the side, which read: The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The teens watched as the team hoisted the body onto a gurney in the back of the van, fighting to keep its long arms and legs from flailing. Just before they shut the van's back doors, the creature made a sound: a sad sound, Jayden said, like a slow, mournful wail.

If you recall, this description is remarkably similar to the sound Rob Walton, the local jogger, heard, and it's this detail that convinces me that the creature Jayden and Jazmine saw that night was the same creature Rob saw that morning he was out jogging.

It was like a scene from a movie, Jayden told me, this strange thing crying as it was taken out of the park against its will. He felt like something wrong was happening, like the people should let the creature go, even though he knew that they might be removing the creature because it was hurt, or dangerous to humans. Before he had time to process the moment further, though, a member of the team broke from the group and approached him and Jazmine.

"You see nothing," she said, "there's nothing happening here."

She told the teens to get lost before the police were called, and said that if they reported what they'd seen to anyone, there'd be trouble. Before Jayden and Jazmine had time to respond, she and the rest of her team got into the van with the creature and drove off.

It was a strange, and deeply terrifying, moment and Jayden told me later that he and Jazmine could barely believe it was real. It was tempting to write the entire thing off as an odd, eerie nightmare caused by one too many monster movie, and Jayden and Jazmine might have done just that if it weren't for one small thing: the picture.

Jazmine had taken a picture of the creature with her iphone, struggling in the straitjacket as it was hauled into the van. It's a blurry, poorly lighted photo, of course, but the details are clear enough to prove that everything Jayden and Jazmine said was true: there is a large, human-shaped creature, its face and body obscured in a straitjacket and a

hoodie, the only piece of visible skin is a small sliver of its neck. The team surrounding it is also hidden by masks and dark clothing, and there's nothing specific or particular about the van save for the Hopkins logo on the side. One thing, though is clear: the creature is being forced into van against its will, and its fighting back.

The pair spent the rest of the night debating what to do with the photo, should they keep it private, should they tell, and they decided in morning that they'd let the public decide what to make of it.

They posted it to Jazmine's instagram account, along with a caption explaining the events as they'd observed them. Within minutes, internet rumors began flying about its veracity, its implications, and its connection to Rob Walton's creature and Victor Frankenstein. Many suspected the creature was Frankenstein himself, taken from the woods against his own will by a team of Hopkins scientists. Others thought it was a publicity stunt created by Frankenstein, one he'd been planning all along as some kind of mass statement against his former university. Still others thought it was a totally fake picture, created by two bored teens looking to cash in on the public obsession with the Leakin Park monster.

These rumors might have continued indefinitely were it not for the events of the next day. On 8:32 AM, on Thursday, May 5, the Johns Hopkins Department of Medicine put out a press release. It started the way you'd probably expect, by claiming that Hopkins was not responsible for the image recently posted to social media, and reminding the public of how easy it is these days to doctor and manipulate images with photo editing software.

This could have closed the door on the picture right then, and encouraged the public to write it off as something concocted by a few attention-seeking teens, were it not for the second part of the press release released by Hopkins. The release stated:

...we, can, however confirm that there is a creature in our possession which was recently discovered in Baltimore's Leakin park. We can further confirm that the creature is not our former graduate student Victor Frankenstein. We cannot confirm that the creature is entirely human, and as such the creature is being held in the Hopkins labs for its own safety, and the safety of the general public, pending further examination. We are cooperating with all local authorities to ensure we are following state and federal law to the utmost degree in this situation, and will continue to do so for as long as the creature remains in our care.

The public response to the press release was unprecedented. Jazmine's photo was retweeted by all the major news outlets, and within hours it had gone viral. What's interesting to me is not only how popular the photo was, but how the media chose to present it: newspapers emphasized the danger inherent in the creature. Headlines like "monster in our midst" and "danger incarnate in Baltimore's Leakin park" sprang up on newspapers and blogs, accompanied by articles that praised Hopkins for removing this dangerous creature from public society. I suppose I shouldn't be at all surprised by this—after all, this sort of fear-mongering is what sells news—but I found that the more I read, the more kept coming back to what Jayden told me about the moment he first saw the creature: that he was seeing something wrong, something that was cruel and inhuman being done to the creature that was in the straitjacket.

This is the view also taken by Ace Delaney, a grad student at the University of Maryland, College Park, whose currently studying Government and Politics. DeLaney has been pushing—quite publicly—for the release of the creature from the Hopkins lab since the moment the press release hit the news. He’s written op-eds, blog posts, and done interviews, and he recently started a kickstarter campaign to raise money to sue Hopkins over what he claims is the holding of a human being against its will. To learn more about his work, and campaign, I sat down with Ace.

Margaret: *So you see this situation as—*

Ace: *A rights violation. This is a clear case of a living, breathing person held in captivity against his will.*

Margaret: *Against his will?*

Ace: *Well, I mean it’s pretty clear. Take a look at the picture. He clearly doesn’t want to be contained in that straitjacket, and there’s no evidence he needs to be. He hasn’t done anything violent other than resist being forced into this bondage and whisked away to some strange laboratory. We’ve heard of no one that’s been killed, or harmed, or even threatened.*

Margaret: *Right, but I guess the argument is that it can’t be controlled, that he isn’t entirely human so it isn’t necessarily possible to it to control—*

Ace: *Can I, can I stop you right there?*

Margaret: *Sure.*

Ace: *I want to talk about what it actually means to be human. Now, we know because of the press release that the creature isn’t Victor Frankenstein, and according to Rob Walton, he’s a monster. But that’s really it, really all we’ve heard. You’ve seen the picture, yeah?*

Margaret: *I have.*

Ace: *And you agree that the thing in that picture looks more like a human than anything else?*

Margaret: *I mean, yes, it’s not like it’s a wild deer or something. It seems human. But that doesn’t mean...*

Ace: *Doesn’t mean what?*

Margaret: *It doesn’t mean he’s not a threat. Maybe he’s someone who’s...mentally ill. Or dangerous. You know, a criminal menace to society. I mean, think about it, he’s been living alone in the woods.*

Ace: *I mean sure, okay. But even if it is someone who is mentally ill, or a dangerous criminal, what right does Hopkins have to lock him up in a laboratory?*

Margaret: *Well, they said they were cooperating with the authorities. I'm sure they know what they're doing...*

Ace: *I don't buy it. I think they're cooperating sure, but I think they're hiding something.*

Margaret: *What would they be hiding?*

Ace: *I don't know. Or at least, I don't know yet. But why else would they be so secretive about what's happening? Why aren't they telling us more?*

Margaret: *To find out more, Ace told me, about what's really going on, he's started a kickstarter campaign that will raise money to, in his words, "sue the pants off Hopkins" for keeping the creature locked up. Though he doubts a trial will result in what she really wants—total freedom for the creature—he's hoping it will at least function as a mechanism for public disclosure, which means that Hopkins, and potentially any local authorities they're in cahoots with, will have to come clean about what, exactly, they're up to.*

To learn more about Ace's campaign and contribute to his kickstarter, you can visit our website, itsalivepodcast.weebly.com.

And it's on that note that I'm going to bring this episode to a close. Before I go, though, there's one more detail that I'd like to share: the image of a single, tiny seashell, tattooed on the neck of the creature. I mentioned earlier that in the Jasmine's picture, the only part of the creature that's visible is his neck. At first glance, and second glance, and really any glance—it seems like the neck is just a small patch of blurry skin. Recently, though a team of photo editors from People magazine took the image and zoomed it in several hundred percent, and in doing that they made out what they claim to be a tattoo of a seashell—a cockle to be specific—that's just barely visible. Perhaps, they claim, the tattoo means that the creature is really a mermaid, washed up and made human by Victor Frankenstein.

I'm not sure whether I buy that the creature is a mermaid, or even that he has a shell tattoo on his neck, but I'm sharing the news publicly in case it rings a bell for anybody. If any of our listeners out there are able to identify him based on this feature, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me. Our contact information information is on our website. And in any case, be sure to tune in next time for news, updates, and more as we continue to unravel the story of the creature in Leakin Park.