

Episode 3: Who is the Creature, Really?

Margaret: *Welcome back to It's Alive: the Podcast. If you've been listening with us these past few weeks, you've got a good understanding of the story that's been building in Baltimore, Maryland, ever since a creature was discovered by jogger Rob Walton in the city's Leakin Park. So far, the creature's identity remains ambiguous, though there's suspicion that he's somehow connected to former Hopkins med student Victor Frankenstein. As it stands, he's being held in Hopkins labs, pending further examination.*

At the end of our last episode, I noted that certain photo editors uncovered a clue to the creature's identity: a small tattoo of a seashell—a tiny cockle—on the lower part of his neck. I invited anyone who might have more information about this to contact me, and if I'm speaking honestly I thought that nothing would happen.

In truth, I thought this detail was more of a hoax than anything else, just another tabloid rumor generated by fame-hungry editors who manipulated an image, so when I received an email a few weeks ago from a woman named Agatha Dane, claiming she had information that could help me, I was skeptical.

Margaret: *Hello?*

Agatha: *Hi, hi there hon.*

Margaret: *Is now a good time?*

Agatha: *Yeab, I can talk now. Nothing goin' on here in the daytime, I'll tell ya that.*

Margaret: *That's Agatha I'm speaking to in the phone call. She's the sole owner of Safie's, an exotic dance club in Baltimore. She founded the club herself over a decade ago, she told me, and over time has built a reputation as one of the city's best places for dance. On any given night, the place is packed with men looking to have a drink and unwind with the infamous Safie's girls. Agatha, a former dancer herself, takes pride in selecting each and every girl that comes through her door, and as such she remembers every one. In particular, she remembers a girl who worked with her, one of her best dancers, who just so happened to have a peculiar, cockle-shaped tattoo on her neck.*

I'm going to let my conversation with Agatha speak for itself:

Margaret: *So I'm calling to talk to you about this email you sent me. You said you might have some details about the creature that was recently discovered in Leakin Park?*

Agatha: *Yeab, I got details. First thing, though, you've been gettin' it wrong. Talkin he did this and his rights are that.*

Margaret: *Some part of that is incorrect?*

Agatha: *It's a girl, hon. It's a she.*

Margaret: *You mean to tell me that you know for a fact that the Creature is a woman.*

Agatha: *Not just a woman. A dancer.*

Margaret: *You mean she used to dance for you?*

Agatha: *Yeab.*

Margaret: *Can you tell me more about her, when she started, what she was like?*

Agatha: *So, okay, first thing is I run a professional place. No funny business. You come, you dance, you get paid, you go home. And I like to hire women who think the same way. Clean, safe, keep-their-mind-on-the-job girls. I was really taking a chance with Liz when I—*

Margaret: *Liz?*

Agatha: *That's her name, the girl. Liz Lavenza.*

Margaret: *Got it.*

Agatha: *So anyways, this is about four years ago when she shows up on my doorstep. She was a broken thing when she arrived, I'll tell you that.*

Margaret: *She just showed up at the dance club?*

Agatha: *Yep, no history or anything to speak of. An orphan. Living off the streets, I think. And she was in a bad shape too, dirty and banged up, and too skinny and her hair all matted to her head like an animal.*

Margaret: *Banged up how?*

Agatha: *Like someone did it to her. Bruises, you know, her neck and her arms. And of course that tattoo, on her neck, shaped like the shell. Which is how I knew it was her in that photo.*

Agatha: *So this girl came, and what, asked you for work?*

Agatha: *Right. I told her to get lost, right away, that I didn't take girls in her condition, but she begged—I mean really begged, she was on her knees pleading with me at the bar—to give her five minutes on the floor. Show me what she could do.*

Margaret: *And did you?*

Agatha: *Yea, I figured what the hell. Girl wants the job that bad, she's got something inside of her people will pay for. So anyways, I help her clean up, get that hair all shiny and an outfit and I sent her out. And my god was she good. I mean there are girls that can dance and girls that can DANCE.*

Margaret: *What made her good?*

Agatha: *It's the eyes. So many girls you put them out there and they're just like dead deer, like something got shot inside of them and they never quite recovered. But Liz, god, she had this gaze like...I mean men would just melt. Puddles all over the floor.*

Margaret: *So you took her on? As an employee?*

Agatha: *Damn straight. And she was just like that, incredible, every night she danced. Which really was every night of the week. She worked as much as I'd let her.*

Margaret: *Why do you think that was?*

Margaret: *It took Agatha a long time to answer this question, but once she started, I found she couldn't stop talking. Over the course of the next half hour, she painted a portrait for me of the girl who'd been her highest performing dancer. Liz was a charmer on the floor, Agatha explained, someone who could transfix anyone—man or woman—who watched her dance. She had a way of making people feel at home with her, like they could escape all of their problems just by looking into her eyes while she performed for them.*

After our conversation, I asked Agatha to email me a photo of Liz, and staring at it I could see what she meant. She has these bright green enchanting eyes, and even in the photo it's hard to stop staring at them.

For those who really wanted to know her though, it was difficult to get past Liz's exterior. Though many of the girls became more alive, more comfortable being themselves once they got off the dance floor, Agatha told me Liz always became much more reserved. She never engaged in discussions with the other dancers, and when she wasn't working didn't linger at the club. She left immediately following her shift—presumably, Agatha said, to go home, but really she had no idea where she went.

Margaret: *How long did she work for you?*

Agatha: *Three years.*

Margaret: *And during that time, what did you learn about her? I mean, her personal life?*

Agatha: *Nothing. Jack shit. I couldn't tell you where she lived, where she came from, what she wanted, none of that stuff. I think maybe she drove a blue car. The only thing, really, I mean the only thing I remember other than how good she was was that there was this one guy who really took a shine to her.*

Margaret: *This one guy?*

Agatha: *Yeah, the one that everyone's been talking about. You know. Victor.*

Margaret: *Victor Frankenstein?*

Agatha: *Yep, he's the one. He was a pale thing, let me tell you. And those big eyes, not charming like Liz's though, he had eyes like a baby. Like the whole world was just this thing he was discovering. Anyways, he'd come to the club before, off and on over the years, to see the girls when his stress level was high. But then he came in one night, a few years back, and he saw Liz dance and that was just it. He only saw her after that. And almost every night.*

Margaret: *Is that common? That a person will become that attached to a particular dancer?*

Agatha: *I mean, they've all got their favorites, red hair or a babyface or something. But the way he was with her, with Liz...no, I mean I've never seen that before. At first, honestly, I was worried, that he was one of those creeps, some weirdo that would stalk her and follow her to the ladies room. I thought about telling him he couldn't come anymore, that he was banned from the club, but Liz told me that it was fine. She said she was okay with always dancing for him. I think she actually liked him back, I mean, you know outside the floor.*

Margaret: *So they were a couple?*

Agatha: *Hell, if I know. Maybe. Usually with that though, when there's dating, the man will stop coming to see the girl dance. Why buy the cow, you know? Plus they'll kill the energy. No man wants to see his lady dancing for other guys. But Victor, he kept coming to see her, almost every night, and she kept dancing and they'd just look at each other with those big, looney eyes.*

This strange relationship, Agatha told me, went on for over a year. Victor would come and Liz would dance, happily, for him, and he'd pay and he'd leave, and then she'd leave at the end of her shift, separately. In the entire time Agatha knew them both, she never once saw them offer any indication that they really spent time together outside of Safie's though it was apparently to everyone in the club that there was a romance there.

Margaret: *When was the last time you saw them?*

Agatha: *A year ago. One night Liz was there, just like usual and then the next night she just didn't come, and then the next. She disappeared.*

Margaret: *Just...disappeared? No note, no anything?*

Agatha: *I called the number I had for her, yeah, but it was bullshit. Just something she wrote down. I don't think she even owned a cell phone.*

Margaret: *And Victor?*

Agatha: *He came a few times, asking after her and all, but then he disappeared too. I figured he was just so heartbroken, you know, about Liz.*

Margaret: *And that was it? That was the last you saw of them both?*

Agatha: *Before I got the call.*

Margaret: *The phone call?*

Agatha: *A man called me one day, about three months after she'd left, said he'd found the body of a girl in real bad shape. There was with no ID, no cell phone, no anything. The only thing he could find was a scrap of paper in her pocket with our number on it. When I arrived, an ambulance was there, taking her body away. There was nothing they could do.*

Margaret: *What had happened to her?*

Agatha: *Someone beat her up. Real bad. Same type of thing as when I first met her, bruises all over her body. Poor thing looked like a train wreck when she passed.*

Margaret: *And yet...*

Agatha: *And yet.*

Margaret: *And yet you're sure this person in that picture is her, kicking and thrashing and very much alive in that straitjacket?*

Agatha: *I know. I know it can't be her, that's what I tell myself because I saw her dead, but it's strange because I also know that shell tattoo doesn't lie. I've never seen one like it before or since. It's a crazy world.*

Margaret: *After my interview with Agatha, I did some additional searching on Liz Lavenza. I was hoping to find something, anything, that clarified how this girl went from being a top notch dancer to dead to a wild creature in the park, fighting back and wailing as her body was shoved into a van.*

Unfortunately, though, Agatha was right: there's really nothing more about Liz Lavenza out there. The story about her body being found was kept out of the media, and other than Agatha, no one seems to know that she existed. It's likely, in my opinion, that Liz Lavenza isn't this girl's real name.

Margaret: *Do you miss her?*

Agatha: *I really do. I mean, she was a girl who could dance...*

Margaret: *The only person who's out there that might still be able to help us is Victor Frankenstein, though he's unfortunately even harder to find than Liz is.*

We do, however, have a few more details about his past, which I'll be examining in our next episode. Join me then, as I take a deeper look at everything that's known about Victor Frankenstein. I'll be talking to his colleagues, his roommates, his childhood friends to try and understand this strange young man: the driven, lonely med student who fell in love with a beautiful dancer before he disappeared.