

Heavy Feather Review

# “CisWorld,” a speculative essay by Torrey Peters

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If there were only trans people in the world, would the monsters in horror movies be cisgender people? The way that cis people have their monsters and villains in transgender characters like Buffalo Bill, or Michael Caine’s character in *Dressed To Kill*, or Angela in *Sleepaway Camp*, or Brother Martin in the *X-Files* episode “Gender Bender,” or Lt. Einhorn in *Ace Ventura*, or Ryan in *The House at the End of the Street*, or A/CeCe in *Pretty Little Liars*, or Z-Man in *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, or Dr. Frank N. Furter, or The Bride in Black in *Insidious*, or whatever gender thing was happening with Norman Bates? Would teenagers hold flashlights under their chins and whisper tales about a creature lurking in the nearby woods; a creature who has—gasp!—*never questioned the gender identity assigned to them at birth?*

Here is the setup for a horror movie that takes place in that world—which happens to also correspond exactly to a date that I went on in this world: in the opening scene, a trans man and a trans woman are in a truck, driving on rural Vermont roads to go see some friends who live out in the woods.

The lady sitting in the passenger seat is named ... let’s just say ... Torrey. She’s a little over a year into transition, bottle blonde, and—since this is my movie setup—incredibly attractive. Like, movie viewers probably need to squint when she’s on the screen. For the purposes of the film, we’ll name the guy driving...Johnny. He’s sporting a cool mustache, but otherwise—let’s be honest here—he’s probably out of his league with this Torrey chick.

Johnny has just gotten the truck the week before. It’s a 1996 Ford F150 with an extended cab, and his phone is full of selfies of himself standing in front of it wearing aviators. Now that he and Torrey are in Vermont, driving from Brooklyn, Johnny indulges in a lot of one-finger-raised-from-the-steering-

wheel-rural-dude waves whenever he passes other pickup trucks on the winding roads, and he stops for gas more than necessary, so that he and other guys with trucks can complement each other's vehicles, while they stand with the gas nozzle gushing from crotch-height.

Any movie viewer can see that from the way that Torrey makes eyes at Johnny that she finds all of this overt masculinity really hot. She's practically purring as he throws around the stick shift, and she's leaning towards him as far as her seatbelt allows, like he's magnetized and she's made of iron. They're talking feminist literature, but half of what she says could be understood as invitations for road-head.

Viewers familiar with horror movies will recognize, already, a few tropes. Terse masculine dude in control of his machine. Submissive over-sexed girlfriend accessorizing his truck, which he drives confidently towards destinations unknown. The two of them engaged in the most heterosexual of banter. Except there's a level of self-awareness here that's almost campy. She's a little too breathy, a little too coy, bats those mascara-drenched lashes a little too eagerly. He clenches his jaw and calls her babe a little too often. They are a somehow knowingly stereotypical. Is this one of those cult campy horror movies?

Actually no. But I could see how you'd think so if you're not used to watching horror in all-trans world. In fact, what you're noticing as campy gender stereotypes is a kind of eroticized heterosexual role-play common to movies made in all-trans world. It's very gender confirming for both characters, a situation with which the all-trans audience will be quite familiar. Hence the conversational mix of feminist literature and road-head innuendo. He's signaling: it's safe to be a girly slut with me, I still respect you. And she's signaling: awesome, I want to S your manly D.

But even if this isn't a camp horror movie, it's still a horror movie. Which means something has to go wrong so that they can meet the monster, face the eerie, encounter the sublime. In this case, Torrey, with her phone service going in and out, realizes that she's gotten them lost. Scanning the landscape for something familiar, she suggests that they cut across a thin leaf-strewn dirt road, that goes round a bend in the woods, and up a mountain. There are PRIVATE PROPERTY signs and NO TRESSPASSING signs, but Torrey says, no, she is sure this is the way. Of course, by now, night has fallen, and the low skies have let loose a torrent of rain. Rivulets of water run down the sloped dirt road, eroding it even as they drive. Mud and decaying leaves coat the trucks tires, and for once, Johnny clenches his jaw in concentration rather than sexiness. He wrangles his new beast to the top of the mountain, where the road dead-ends in a clearing. Small sheds slump half-hidden in the shadows of trees. Lightning illuminates an unpainted wooden cabin, the flash reflecting in the darkened windows. It's impossible to tell when someone was last here. Could have been last week. Could have been last decade.

“You know,” says Torrey, “This might not be the right way.”

“I can't believe I let a woman read the map,” Johnny replies, and Torrey purrs. So hetero!

Johnny attempts a three-point turn, but his truck is so impressively long and girthy that he barely has room on the road. Unfortunately, Johnny miscalculated in the dark, and as the truck comes around, the left wheels ride a ditch on the side of the road. “Not in there!” Torrey cries, just as the edge of the road crumbles and the heavy truck jerks sideways on an slow avalanche of mud. By then, Johnny's got the truck in reverse, but even as the mud-slick wheels spin backwards, they're creeping forward down the slope of the hill, steadily, steadily, until the truck comes to rest against into an old wooden pole, with a quiet *dink*. The wheels spin in the roar of the rain and the clattering of the bare trees in the wind, but the truck is wedged fast between the steep hill and the pole.

“Did you mean to do that?” asks Torrey.

Johnny let the tires spin a bit longer, and then takes his foot off the gas. “Does anyone want to buy a girlfriend?” he asks the ceiling, “Because being single is more and more appealing.”

Torrey laughs, unconcerned. “What?” she replies, “Are you saying you didn’t contrive to get us stuck just so you could show off and rescue me? When else do you get to get shirtless and mud-spattered and grunty?”

“Torrey,” he replies, exasperated, “Do you realize that we are two transsexuals, in the woods, at night, in the rain, trespassing on someone’s private road, with a vehicle that is stuck in the mud. This not funny. This is the beginning of a horror movie.”

Of course, he is breaking the fourth wall with this line—but after the *Scream* franchise, that’s standard for horror movies. We can also assume that the all-trans audience will laugh and laugh at his use of the word transsexual. How absurdly archaic! This Johnny character is a real card.

But Torrey is chastened. The camera catches creases crossing her face, signaling that something is worrying her. “You don’t think ...” and then she breaks off, unable to finish the sentence.

“I don’t know what’s out here,” he pauses to nod at the darkened cabin up the hill. “But that’s the kind of place they hole up. It looks abandoned now, but all the same, I don’t want to linger.”

For once, Torrey has no coy remark. She’s scared, and closes her eyes as the camera closes in on her face. The screen goes white. It’s a flashback.

As it turns out—both Torrey and Johnny have seen a cis person before. They know the stories are real. In fact, their encounter happened only earlier that day, at a Price Chopper in Vermont.

For a horror movie to captivate its audience, its monsters must wield some uncanny power. Monsters like werewolves wield obvious powers, but even the seemingly un-supernatural serial killers edge into the uncanny, into the liminal space beyond our ken—they’ve forsaken empathy and compassion to attain a capability for feats of cruelty beyond typical humanity. In all-trans world, everybody knows the power of cis people, just as in this world, everyone knows the power of vampires. Cis people have the power to make a trans person waver and question their surety in their own gender, a power that alters what a trans victim knows to be reality as surely as that same trans person knows a brick is solid.

That’s what happened to Torrey in the Price Chopper earlier that day, and which incident the film suddenly flashes back to as Johnny and she sit in the truck. The white of the flashback fades to show her standing in the Asian Foods section, looking for sesame seeds, and suddenly from behind her, she hears, a gruff *What The Fuck?* And there he is, a cis man, staring at her. He looked human, of course, as cis people often do—but Torrey could feel his power flowing like a river’s current around her and down the aisle. She knew he was cis from the way, caught in his hard gaze, she suddenly felt herself a helpless male thing, in too tight jeans and smudgy eyeliner. She wants to cry out for protection from Johnny, but her voice died in her throat. What if he came, and in the warping gaze of the cis man, she suddenly saw him through those same cis eyes? What if his boots suddenly looked too big for his feet, his shoulders just a little too narrow? But even worse, if Johnny did protect her, their heterosexual role-play would just become standard heterosexuality. A survival strategy. A guy protecting a woman from a guy. A woman reliant on a man. She can’t do that to him. Not her Johnny, and so she drops the sesame seeds and sprints from the Asian Foods Aisle, down along the dairy and meat back corridor,

scanning the aisles until she spots Johnny in the soda section, looking as solid and handsome and capable as he always did. She rushes to him and hugs him tight, almost bowling him over, whispering desperately, we have to go, we have to go, unwilling to explain anything to him until they were safely back in the truck.

When the film flashes forward again, the audience now knows what Torrey and Johnny know: in these woods, there are cis people. And this time, the getaway truck is lodged deep in the mud.

As Johnny prowls around the back of the truck, wedging sticks under the tires, hoping to give the tread something to bite down on, Torrey sends out a series of text messages, trying to give their friend Kris a sense of their location. Johnny has actually never met Kris before, he’s Torrey’s friend, and from the nervous way he watches Torrey text, you can tell he’s unsure of whether or not to rely on a rescue.

Of course, like many trans people, Torrey was always trans, but she transitioned much later than Johnny—and although they don’t really talk about it, because they enjoy the stoic cowboy / doe-eyed lass dynamic they’ve got going, both Johnny and Torrey know that maybe two years prior, Torrey lived in Uganda, where she had a 1989 Diesel Mitsubishi Pajero 4×4, that she regularly drove to the Kenyan and Sudanese borders, through all sorts of conditions, and that between the two of them, her hours accrued with mud-stuck trucks far surpassed his.

“Hey,” Johnny asked quietly, “You want to take a turn behind the wheel?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I guess I could do that.”

On a far off hill, headlights snaked through the trees, then disappeared around a bend. Normally, Torrey wouldn’t have been so reticent to offer her help. Johnny was fairly realistic about what he knew and what Torrey knew, and in normal circumstances, especially being deeply involved in feminist activism, he didn’t see her skills as detracting from his masculinity or her femininity. But now, Torrey knew the stakes were much higher. God knows what would happen if a cis person showed up with their uncanny de-gendering power, and there was Torrey, directing the truck, throwing around that transmission, while Johnny stood idly by watching as someone else saved his truck. It would be awful. Caught in that vulnerable position, their gender positions could be permanently dislodged.

Tentatively, Torrey got into the driver seat. She noticed the truck was not in four-wheel drive, but was careful not to point this out. What if there were cis people creeping around in the bushes? They were known to do that! What if they heard of Johnny’s novice truck failure, and saw how readily Torrey identified it? But it didn’t matter: even in four-wheel drive, the wheels only spin in the mud.

Torrey suggests letting the tire pressure out of the tires for traction. Johnny protests, how would they drive the rest of the way? And just as she’s whispering that as long as they stay on dirt roads, the tires will be okay, the trees at the bottom of the hill illuminate. The camera angle is funny and blurry in the rain, so it looks like maybe an angel has landed down there or something—but suddenly the light clears again, and they see its headlights from a pickup, bearing down on them, sliding and washing as it powers straight for them.

Torrey gasps. She’s in the driver’s seat. This is not good. This is really not good. Johnny steps out, and he stares with intent at the front tire, trying to look purposeful, but mostly he just looks confused by a piece of rubber. Already Torrey can feel it, the uncanny sense of her gender wavering, flickering in and out like the dying of a once-beautiful aurora borealis.

“No,” she whispers, “oh no.”

Johnny is standing now, facing the oncoming truck, with his fists balled. The camera angle catches his silhouette outlined in the beams of light and he looks, for once, breakable.

The pickup skids to a halt. Neither Torrey nor Johnny can make out the driver in the bright headlights blinding them. The door creaks open and a heavy boot lands in the mud. “Thought that was you,” a voice says, and then the aurora borealis of Torrey’s gender steadies and bursts anew in a wash of vivid light and color. “When you wrote about the abandoned shed, I knew there was only one place you could be.”

“Kris!” she cries. And it is indeed Kris, in a tan Carhart jacket, scratching his stubble as he examines the Johnny’s stuck truck. To Torrey, Kris looks every bit the hero that he is. She regrets that her hair is all wet. She’d flat ironed it before this whole truck incident.

Johnny looks sheepish. Although his truck is a pretty good Ford F-150, Kris’s truck is a Ford F-250, with a lift and mudding tires. The rumble of its engine is just a little bit deeper, and while Johnny’s truck bed is largely empty, Kris’s truck bed is filled with tools.

“That’s quite a hole you’ve got in there.” Kris observes, peering at the crater the spinning wheels have created.

“Uh, yeah,” said Johnny, “I guess so.”

“Right,” says Kris, “So what I suggest, is that I pull up behind you, and I’ve got this rope that I can tie us together with.”

“Yeah,” says Torrey, “You can put your trucks, like, rear to rear, and I can use the rope to tie you together, and then give you both a signal to go at once.”

“There isn’t some other way?” Johnny asks. He sounds both grateful and regretful at once.

“Nope,” said Kris, “This always works. Torrey, you know the knots that’ll hold to tie us together?”

“Oh, yeah,” says Torrey. “I know a bunch.”

The mood is suddenly changed. Never before have gender roles been so firm.

“This is the gayest thing I’ve ever done,” says Johnny, but he’s looking a little relieved. For two rugged trucking dudes to tie each other up butt to butt, they have to be pretty secure in their gender roles. It means there’s not much risk of any cis people around.

“Kris’s truck is pretty powerful.” Torrey says. “I wonder if the rope can hold it.”

“Well,” says Kris, “How about if I get really close so we’re touching each other’s bumpers, and that way you can double tie us.”

Johnny groans.

Kris nods and pats Johnny’s shoulder, “Don’t worry, little buddy, I know this is your first truck, so I’ll

go really gently”

When they’re in their driver seats, and in position, Torrey ties them up. She raises her hand, the engines roar, and the trucks strain and groan. With a sliding satisfying sucking sound, Johnny’s truck pulls free. Torrey finds the whole thing pretty sexy. All the genders are just where they want them. When she hops back into Johnny’s cab, Kris gives a wave, and shouts, follow me!

Johnny does, but looks at Torrey briefly, and quips, “I’m still taller than him.”

And then the credits roll. In this world, we’d find that ending pretty unsatisfying. This was supposed to be a horror movie! The only monster was at the Price Chopper, and that one is still on the loose! What the fuck?

But in all trans-world, that’s not what audiences are looking for. In all trans-world, that movie is a hit. Rotten Tomatoes gives it 98%. Because in all trans-world, the movies that do best are the ones that end with a double-vision of gender. All that movie really consists of is two parallel scenes, each with two men and one woman, with the woman in peril, and the two men competing to save her. Both scenes are actually pretty stereotypically gendered. Men are at odds with each other, triangulating their desires through a woman. In the first though, the gender is all menace. In the second, the gender is all play, turns ever towards sex. And seriously, that’s what really gets off audiences in all-trans world: gender without menace. It’s an almost unknown concept in cis world, but it’s the climax that guarantees a commercial hit in trans world. The last line is ironic: Yeah, Johnny is taller than Kris. But come on—any viewer can see that Torrey is at least as tall as both of them.

But the just as such a movie wouldn’t fare so well commercially in this world, the date upon which it was based did not end so cinematically either. Because, probably, you think the conceit of this movie, or of this essay, is that cis people could be monsters with superpowers to de-gender trans people. Nope! The conceit is that there could ever be an all-trans world—cis people definitely have superpowers. To be trans is to try desperately to blend into a world of vampires. To hope that we blend in enough that cis people don’t decide to exercise their supernatural powers upon us.

Because, unlike in the movie, here’s what happened to me and Johnny. I refused to get out of the truck again. Whenever we got to a store, I made him go in and get snacks. I relied on him to choose what I should eat. I clung to him whenever we went for walks, desperately hoping he’d protect me. I grew careful of what I told him, started withholding things, fearing that if I displeased him, he’d abandon me. Without him around, I disguised myself as a boy. And as I relied more and more upon him, his power over me grew, as men’s power over women’s so frequently does. He found himself telling me what to wear, once reached out and took a pair of earrings off of my ears. I suspected him of putting me down in calculated ways, especially putting down my work, so that I’d crave his approval. He said I was crazy to think that, and in response, I accused him of gaslighting me, all the while desperately wanting him to tell me I wasn’t crazy, to approve of me again. When I hooked up with a woman, I hid it from him, even though he and I weren’t exclusive, and when he found out about my hookup, he accused me of fucking people all over town. What we had hoped could be gender without menace, sexy heterosexual role-play, just became heterosexuality, became sexism, became patriarchy. We watched it happen, watched Johnny make decisions, watched me sulkily acquiesce, each slightly more disappointed in ourselves than the other, but still resentful of the other. It was slow, and cruel,

and the more we did it, the more safely we moved, like cis, amongst the cis. We lasted three months, until one afternoon, in an ugly hissing fight, we saw clearly how much power Johnny had amassed, how pathetic I had become. Like the transformation scene in any good horror movie—from werewolf films to *The Fly*—we looked at ourselves that afternoon with disgust and fear and understood that we had become the monsters.



**Torrey Peters** is a writer living in Brooklyn. Her essays and stories have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Epoch*, *Brevity*, *McSweeney's*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Pinch*, *Shenandoah*, *Gawker*, and her work has been anthologized in *Best Travel Writing* (2009, 2010), *Tinderbox Editions*, *I'll Tell You Mine: 35 Years of the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program*, and *WaveForm: Twenty-First Century Essays By Women*. However, past publications aside, she's trans, and has concluded that the publishing industry doesn't serve trans women. So now, she just wants to give her work away for free to other trans girls (everyone else gets the benefit though). Get more of her work on Twitter, @torreypeters, or on her website, [torreypeters.com](http://torreypeters.com).

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