Tratto da:
Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein
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CONCEPTION

IT ACTUALLY WAS a dark and stormy night. All through that chilly summer of 1816, ominous gray clouds had swept across the skies, bringing fierce thunderstorms to much of Europe and North America. Earlier in the year, astronomers had seen unusual sunspots through their telescopes. By June, the spots were plainly visible, and people began to fear that they were portents of doom. A pamphlet that was passed from hand to hand in Paris warned that the end of the world was near. In some parts of Europe and New England, snow fell in July. It would long be remembered as a year when summer never came.

So it was that a violent thunderstorm was raging on a frigid June night as five young people gathered inside the Villa Diodati, a luxurious summerhouse on the southern shore of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. One of the group would have been instantly recognizable to most people in Europe or America. His imposing profile aroused the envy of young men, who obsessively imitated his clothes and hairstyle, and the secret admiration of young women, who had heard it whispered (in the words of Lady Caroline Lamb, his onetime lover) that Lord Byron was "mad, bad, and dangerous to know." And in fact Byron had fled here to escape the scandal caused by the allegation that he had committed incest with his half-sister Augusta — a rumor that had caused Byron's young wife to leave him.

Though only twenty-eight, Byron was already the most famous English poet of the time — an era when writing verse was the equivalent of playing in a rock band today. Two years earlier, some ten thousand copies of Byron's book-length poem, *The Corsair,* had been sold the day it was published, and it went through seven printings in the following month, a record that has probably never been equaled for a book of verse.

At least two of the other members of the group assembled in his villa were also poets, though neither had anything like the reputation that Byron did. One was Byron's companion, the brilliant Dr. John Polidori, who had graduated from the medical school of the University of Edinburgh two years before at the tender age of nineteen. Polidori would have gladly given up his medical career for poetry, but Byron mocked Polidori's artistic efforts and made the earnest young man the butt of jokes. The third youthful poet in the room, however, had done what few men — and no women — had been able to do: earn Byron's respect as an intellectual equal. This was Percy Bysshe Shelley, age twenty-three, whose work was then known only to a small circle of literary friends. In contrast to the dark, brooding, cynical Byron, Shelley was angel-faced, blond, and ethereal. He felt he could change the world through the power of his words, despite the fact that the world had so far shown virtually complete indifference to his efforts.

The two women in the room were both in their teens. One was Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who had become Shelley's lover two years earlier despite the inconvenient fact that he had been (and still was) married to someone else. Mary's parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, two of the most famous radicals of their time, had condemned marriage as a form of prostitution. Nevertheless, Godwin regarded it as a betrayal when his sixteen-year-old daughter ran off with Shelley, a man who had declared himself Godwin's disciple. Mary hoped to placate Godwin by writing some great work that would prove her worthy of being not only his child, but also the child of the famous mother who had died giving birth to her. Thus far, Mary had not found a subject that would justify that sacrifice.

The last person in the circle was Mary's stepsister, the beautiful and seductive eighteen-year-old Claire Clairmont (as she currently called herself), the catalyst who had brought the group together. In the spring of 1816 she had boldly written Byron to request a meeting at his London townhouse. Though he received countless such appeals from young women, Byron was touched by Claire's declaration that her future was in his hands and "the Creator ought not to destroy his creature." That sparked a sexual tryst which resulted in less abstract creative activity: as the five listened to the thunderstorm raging outside, only Claire was aware that she was now carrying Byron's child.

To entertain his guests on that rainy summer evening, Byron opened a volume of German horror stories translated into French, and began to read aloud from it. Flickering candles and burning logs in the fireplace provided the only light, other than the flashes of lightning that abruptly illuminated the windows. Byron liked to frighten people, and as the others became increasingly agitated by the jarring crashes of thunder and the howling of the wind outside, his enjoyment increased. Upon finishing, Byron closed the book and proposed a contest: each of them would try to write a ghost story. He could hardly have imagined that his challenge would result in a novel that was destined to become more famous than his own work or that Mary Godwin, eventually to be known as Mary Shelley, would be the author.