

A MONSTER by VIOLET



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For Vanessa

Laura Wake

*Surely in no other craft as in that of the sea do
the hearts of those already launched to sink or
swim go out so much to the youth on the brink,
looking with shining eyes upon that glitter of the
vast surface which is only a reflection of his own
glances full of fire.*

From Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad.



1

Baby Maria had been crying for about thirty minutes. Lisa was still sleeping. Violet had been lying next to her for hours wondering how someone could consume that many amphetamines and still be able to sleep. Her eyes felt like sandy marbles grinding around in their sockets, and in her stomach was a sharp tugging sensation. She rolled onto her side and looked at Lisa. Her mouth was open, her cheek squashed against the pillow. A line of dark make-up ran from her eye to her nose. They had been awake for three days and Lisa was obviously going to sleep through all the hours they'd missed out on.

Violet picked her clothes up from off the floor and started pulling them on. Her jeans were stuck down between the wall and the mattress. As she pulled them free, coins fell out down the back of the bed.

“Fuck.”

There was no way to get to them.

She walked down the mini-stairway to the lounge where Maria was crying from her playpen. The baby's little hands were clenched so hard into fists that her fingers showed white. Her gummy mouth was open as wide as it could go and her cheeks were dark red from screaming. She was shaking with the effort of crying.

Violet lifted her out and the smell of dirty nappy hit the back of her throat and she turned her head away. Maria's vest was

wet round the neck, and soaked through at the bottom with cold greenish poo that seeped onto Violet's hand.

"Hey... hey calm down," she said.

Violet's brain felt swollen and about to explode out of her ears. She looked round the room for a fresh babygrow but the only one she could see had been used to soak up something spilt on the coffee table. She pushed some of the debris off the table with her foot. The glass surface would be cold so she picked up a magazine with one hand, shook it open and laid it on the table, holding her head away from the baby to avoid the smell. Violet laid Baby Maria on the magazine and tried to get the vest undone; Maria's screams seemed to shake the air. Violet tore the nappy off and pushed it to the far end of the table. There might be wipes in the bathroom but she didn't want the baby to fall onto the floor so she used the wet babygrow from the table to clean her. There was no point doing up the cold, wet vest again, so Violet eased it off over the baby's head and threw it towards the nappy. Maria was cleaner but her skin was mottled, clammy and cold. Violet picked her up again and held her against her chest. She was still crying but now her cries were less a yell and more a rhythmical kind of sob. Where Violet's hand lay across the baby's back she could feel the vibrations of each cry.

"Let's get you some food."

She lay Baby Maria on the sofa and went into the kitchen to look for the formula milk. There was a half-full baby bottle on the side. Violet picked it up then decided to start fresh. She threw the contents down the sink and cleaned the bottle out under the hot tap. There was a can of formula milk on the side. She tipped some powder into the bottle and mixed it with water. There was a bottle heater but it looked complicated so she turned the kettle on to put the bottle in a bowl of boiling water like she'd seen people do in restaurants. As the kettle boiled, she held her wrists under the cold tap, then cupped water in her hands and splashed her face.

Left alone, Maria cried louder.

"Okay, I'm coming, I'm coming...calm down."

She remembered something about testing bath water for babies

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with your elbow so the same probably applied to milk. She pulled up her sleeve and shook milk onto her elbow; it was lukewarm.

Violet's throat and nose stung and felt grazed inside. She sniffed hard and tasted blood. She returned to the sofa and sat down to feed Maria. The baby sucked hungrily, and seemed to relax into the crook of her elbow. Violet wanted to turn the telly on but couldn't see the remote.

On the coffee table lay the mirror they'd been using. Long fingerprints covered it where they'd licked up the last bits of powder before resorting to the big, tacky lump of base Lisa always bought as back-up. Violet scanned the mess on the table for a cigarette but could see only empty packets. One Camel Light had been torn open and half its contents used, but there was just enough left in it to smoke a few puffs.

The babygrow depressed her. It lay on the table soaked in whatever it was they'd spilt. It was dirty with ash and other scum. She couldn't remember Baby Maria being there at all last night, yet she thought babies needed feeding every four hours or something. She put her finger in one of the baby's hands and watched her grip it. "I'm sorry," she said.

When Maria had finished drinking, Violet removed the bottle and put it down.

"Hi there," she said, "you feeling better now?"

Maria reached for Violet's face and stretched out her legs. Violet tickled the bottom of her feet. After a while her eyes focussed on Violet's face and she flashed a brief, brilliant smile.

"What you grinning at?" Violet smiled back and settled Maria more comfortably into her arms. She held one of the baby's feet in her hand and touched the tiny toes; they were perfect, and cold like a doll's. Violet wriggled out of her cardigan and laid it over her.

Violet leaned her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes. All the muscles in her neck ached. She couldn't remember much of the last few days or even who had been here. Her body felt hollow as if it had been scraped empty from the inside. She opened her eyes and looked down on Maria who had fallen asleep.

At that moment she decided.

From the kitchen she took the half-empty can of formula milk, then wrapped Maria up in the cardigan, picked her up and walked to the door. She paused, turned back and grabbed the car seat, putting the bottle and the formula inside. Hanging on the door handle was a brown, fleecy babygrow with a hood and ears designed to look like a bear; Violet hooked it over her finger.

Outside she couldn't remember where she'd parked her car. Her arms ached with the effort of carrying Maria in one and the car seat in the other. She felt her pupils shrink painfully from the sunlight. Baby Maria seemed to be enjoying the daylight and was flexing her fingers towards the sky. Where was the car? The best thing would be to walk down all the roads she usually parked in until she found it.

People were waiting at the traffic lights, trapped in the one-way system. They were looking at her strangely. She hoped no one from work was around. As she stopped to push the button to cross she felt cold even knobbles under her feet, and realised she had forgotten her boots.



2

Adam does gymnastics. He climbs to the top of the octagon climbing frame where he swings and jumps from bar to bar. Most people stop half way up the octagon as it's so high. I think it is meant for teenagers or adults because the gaps in the bars are so far apart.

The octagon is made up of metal triangles. I'm the only girl who climbs on it. I play with the girls sometimes but most break times I just like to climb as high as I can and sit on a bar with one hand holding on above me. There is a sand pit underneath so if people fall they don't bleed.

Adam and I are in the same class. Last week we decided to be boyfriend and girlfriend. He gave me a *Milk is Great* ruler that is white and blue. It has a pencil sharpener attached to it and a rubber in a holder.

I am halfway up the octagon. Each triangle is a scary climb because I'm not tall enough to hold two edges at the same time. Whenever I make a move I have to let go completely for a couple of seconds.

Adam is right at the top. He swings by his arms and then reaches up with his legs so he can hang upside down. His school shirt and jumper have fallen down so his tummy shows. His hair is quite long for a boy and it hangs straight down below his head. It's the same colour as a conker and quite shiny. He waves at the children at the

bottom of the octagon who are all watching him, then swings his body so he can grab on with his arms again. He pulls himself up and sits on the top like Spiderman does on a skyscraper.

I've climbed a bit higher every day this week. I want to go as high as Adam, climb over the top and down the other side, or maybe I'll get up there and swing like he does. I will do something spectacular that even he doesn't do. The bell for the end of break goes and I climb down. About four triangles from the bottom I decide to jump. It's quite high. When I land I fall on my bottom. The sand is cold and feels damp. I get up and run after the others.

In Bible Studies, we read a story from the Bible then have to copy it into our exercise books. If you finish you get to draw a picture. I'm quite fast at writing so I get to at least draw a camel before the bell goes for the end of school. I want to draw Isaac's red hairy son Esau but don't have time.

* * *

It is Thursday, and it is English, which is the last lesson before break. Today I am going to climb to the top of the octagon.

Sarah, puts her hand up, "Mrs Martin, I'm going to be sick," she says and starts to get up from her seat.

Mrs Martin looks cross. "Come here then," she says. "Rebecca, take Sarah to the care centre. Everyone else, carry on with your work."

Rebecca is a chubby girl whose parents are from Australia. She is a show off. She gets up from her seat and leads Sarah out. The care centre is horrible. Two hunchbacked ladies work there, and they never give you any medicine or plasters or anything. They make you lie down in a little room with pictures of Jesus dying everywhere. They don't make you feel better at all.

There are lots of hunchbacks that work in our school. The men do outside stuff. One of them has long dark hair and always pushes a wheelbarrow. I run past when I see them because they're creepy.

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The wool of their jumpers looks stretched across the lumps on their backs.

I asked Mum why they don't give you medicine in the care centre when you are ill, and she said that those types of Christians don't believe in it. There is a girl in my class called Esther who is that kind of Christian. She has red hair and freckles with a pink mark on one cheek. She says God touched her there when she was a baby because she is special. I have a strawberry mark on the back of my neck that my Mum says is a birthmark. The thing on Esther's cheek looks the same but I don't tell her because she'll probably tell the teachers.

Esther is not one of my friends. Her friends are called Heather and Poppy. They are quite mean to other people, especially to Hannah who is very shy and often ill. I used to be friends with Esther and went to her house for tea once after school. She has a little brother who also has red hair and an older sister who is deaf and has light brown hair. I think her sister is a teenager, but she doesn't go to school. We all sat on the sofa and watched a film of *Beauty and the Beast*. Her sister's voice sounded strange and Esther kept elbowing and pinching her to be quiet. Even though she is the eldest, I think that Esther bosses her around.

The film was horrible. The beast was like a man but with a swollen lumpy face. His eyes were shaped like a cow's eyes and were close together, and his nose was like a lion's nose, but with pink and waxy looking skin. His skin looked like the earplugs I have to wear for swimming. I don't like wearing them because they always have fluff stuck on them but Mum says I have to because I get ear infections.

Every time the beast came on the screen I looked next to the telly so I could only see part of the picture. He kept coming close to the screen and looked like he was going to come out of the telly. I think he frightened Esther's sister too because when he was on she made little shrieking noises.

When Mum came to pick me up she was with Grandad. I told her I didn't want to go there again and she said I didn't have to. I don't think she likes Esther's family and she said something to

Grandad that I couldn't hear.

Grandad told me that people with red hair have fiery tempers and can withstand pain more than other people. He says they are descended from the Vikings. Esther would make a good Viking, although she is frightened to go up the climbing frame.

The bell goes for the end of the lesson and we go for morning milk. When we've drunk our milk we can go out to the playground. We each get a little bottle of milk with a blue straw. When you finish you take the empty bottle to the counter, rinse it in a bowl of water, and then put it in a crate with others. I drink mine fast because I want to be one of the first people on the climbing frame. I drink it almost in one go then hurry to the counter.

I am about the fifth person to the climbing frame; the boys always get there first. Adam and Matthew from my class are playing a game of 'it' on the climbing frame. They scramble away from each other fast like insects. Matthew keeps getting caught but Adam is even faster at climbing than some of the older boys.

I start to climb straight away because I know the octagon will get busier soon. I get to the point I got to yesterday and spread my arms and legs out wide ready to reach for the next triangle.

"Watch out Violet!" someone shouts and Matthew comes scrambling towards me away from a tall thin boy with white hair who is grabbing at his legs. I wobble and grab hold of the bar I've just left. They rush past me and I see the big boy tap Matthew's leg then climb away quickly downwards. My hair is blonde but the big boy's hair is much lighter than mine. He has bright blue eyes and light eyelashes. My eyes are grey which Grandad says means strength like a soldier.

"Oh, that's the fifth time I've been 'it'!" Matthew says.

The others are already at the other side of the climbing frame.

"Violet!" another voice shouts, "tell him to get a move on!"

Matthew and I look up. It's Adam. He has climbed right over the top and is crawling down towards us.

"Matthew," I whisper, "Pretend you haven't seen him."

"Okay," he says smiling, and stays where he is.

I can see Adam inching closer. The other boys are starting to

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come nearer too.

“What you doing Matt?” one of them shouts.

As Matthew looks round to answer them, Adam’s hand shoots down and pats him on the head. Matthew grabs at him. His fingers just miss Adam’s grey trouser leg and then he falls forward.

“Whoaaahh!” he cries as he loses his balance and his head and body turn upside down towards the sand pit. The last things to leave the climbing frame are his two shiny black shoes. A little “plunk” noise happens as his feet leave the bar and follow his body to the ground. His arms do doggy paddle as if he’s trying to swim away from the sand that is coming up to meet him. The ground is too fast though and he lands on his face and hands. His feet and legs hit the sand last, and he crumples up.

Adam, me, and the big boys all look at each other across the climbing frame then back down to Matthew. It is quiet for a second then Matthew makes a gasping noise.

The boy with white hair gets to him first.

“Are you alright Matthew?” he says.

Another gasping noise comes from Matthew. He is moving slowly, pushing with one arm. The boy helps him to turn onto his back. The other boys have moved down from the climbing frame now and are standing in a circle round Matthew.

“Go and get a teacher, Adam,” one of them says and Adam runs off fast. I stay where I am. Matthew’s eyes are looking everywhere. There is sand in his eyebrows and he has a graze across his nose. He flaps one arm around at everyone. A sound like a backwards burp is coming from him and his body is jumping about like a goldfish that’s been thrown out of its bowl.

“I... I can’t ... breathe,” he says. The words come in little gasps. The three big boys don’t know what to do and they just stand staring at him.

“A teacher’s coming,” one of them says.

Matthew doesn’t say anything he just keeps sucking burps back into his body and waving one arm around.

The teacher who comes is a tall thin man with a ginger beard. He teaches the older children. He kneels down to look at Matthew

who is still making the burping noises.

“Just calm down, son,” he says. “you’ve only winded yourself. In a minute your breath will come normally again.”

“His arm looks funny, Sir,” the boy with white hair says.

“We’ll get him taken off to the care centre in a minute and they can have a look at it.... it’s probably just a sprain. Did you land on it?”

Matthew’s eyes have stopped looking at everyone and are trying to look at the damaged arm. I can see the arm from where I’m sitting. It looks wrong. The teacher pulls Matthew’s shirt sleeve up.

Matthew screams.

Everyone jumps, even the teacher who takes his hand away quickly. I can see Matthew’s arm where his sleeve is pulled up. Between his elbow and his wrist, there is an extra bend that sticks out. The teacher has seen it too. He lifts the arm between two fingers and lays it on Matthew’s tummy. Matthew does a short squeaky scream, this time opening his mouth wide. He screws up his eyes and tears run down his cheeks.

“Be brave,” the teacher says.

Matthew’s eyes open again and turn away from the arm and look up at the sky. His face has gone all white, and he is crying. The teacher was right though, his breathing has gone almost back to normal.

“Go away everyone!” the teacher shouts.

The boys run off and the teacher helps Matthew to stand up. He doesn’t know I’m still on the climbing frame.

They start to walk to the care centre together. Matthew’s good arm holds on to the teacher, the other one just hangs down, not moving and still bent.

The bell hasn’t gone yet and I have the octagon to myself. I stand up and start to climb making sure my arms are spread out wide ready to catch the bars as I move from triangle to triangle. Soon I am on one of the highest levels. I can see straight down to the sand pit. I don’t need to stand up to move triangles anymore but can sit down and edge across the bars keeping my balance. The middle bit of each bar is the scariest because you can’t hold on to

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anything apart from the bar you are sitting on.

I reach the very middle and sit with my feet hanging down, holding on with one hand. I lift the other hand above my head and wave although no one is around. I decide to practice a trick for when the others are here. I sit on the bar holding on with my hands then I let myself drop upside down. I let go with my hands so I am hanging by my knees like a bat. My hair hangs down below my head. I feel something move and my skirt falls over my face, but it's not that long so I can still see. I am glad no one is here now because they would be able to see my knickers. I start swinging myself a bit. My skirt knocks against my nose. If I swung really hard I could probably let go with my knees, leap through the air and catch hold of another bar with my hands.

Suddenly I hear the bell go.

I will wait for when people are watching to do my trick. I pull myself up so I am sitting on the top again. I think it is harder to get down than it is to get up. I feel wobbly and it takes me ages to get to the side. It seems like the bell went a long time ago. When I am almost halfway down I decide to jump. It is higher than I've ever jumped from before. As long as I land on my feet I won't get winded like Matthew.

I land on my feet but because I jumped from so high my knees come up and hit me in the mouth. I bounce and fall onto my front. There is blood in my mouth and a bit on my knee. I stand up and lick the inside of my lip where there is a lump. I wipe round my mouth in case there is blood there and then run to my lesson. My lip tingles as I run.