

Torn

by Michelle Emond

I have a monster. He rests on my shoulder, sometimes my head, his elegant tail wraps around my neck. On the bus ride to school, he hisses at the ordinary old woman next to us, who glares resentfully at my rubies and pearls.

“Careful,” I grin, “He bites.”

With cold thin fingers, I feel him brush methodically at my straight black hair, and I relax into its rhythm. My monster never smiles, but his fangs are so long and sharp and severe, that they force the edges of his pale strained lips into something of a grin, with which he doesn't hesitate to pierce the skin of the boy sitting behind me in class. My monster hadn't liked his cruel opinions on my skirt.

I walk home along the river and the people clear a path for me, their expressions souring with terror and disgust. As I scratch the top of my guardian's feathered head, he purrs and wraps himself tightly around my neck like a scarf. Oddly enough, when I look into the river's water, to check my reflection below, my monster is nowhere to be found. Only a beautiful little girl in expensive clothing stares back, a beautiful little girl whose hair seems to be brushing itself, with no comb in sight.

At home, I am told that the neighbour's girl is about my age, but has no monster like me. She has a cat however, who I caution my guardian, is under no circumstance something to snack on. He respects this fact, despite the drool that hangs down his face showing he doesn't quite agree.

The neighbour's name is Claire, and she's a very pretty girl. She shows off her defined ringlets and blonde coloured hair with every turn of her head. I find myself wondering if my monster would rather be combing through those instead.

When I first meet her, she speaks of dolls and boys and clothes and horses, and how her daddy became very, very rich through hard work and determination. I watch her soft ringlets bounce in agreement. My monster flicks his tail, already bored of the one-sided discussion. In my bag, I find a pair of plain paper scissors. When she turns her sculpted face away from mine, I twist her hair into a messy tail and cut it, right down to the base of her neck. I watch beautiful, blonde locks fall to the floor, catching the light of the sun and shining a notable gold, before hitting the pavement below. Her neck blushes red and she turns around slowly, her face frozen in shock. More pieces tumble from her shoulders as she moves to face me. I notice now, how beautiful her eyes are as well, a deep piercing blue. I hide the scissors behind my back.

She stares at her beautiful locks, now littering the ground below, and tears drop shamelessly from her unhappy eyes. They fall off her plump cheeks and wet the soil below. Her ringlets blow softly away in the wind. I can't help but feel upset, though, I'm not sure why. Claire peers up at me through her freshly chopped bangs. My monster tenses over top of me, but she does not strike.

“Why would you do that?” She manages to spit out between gasps and tears. My eyebrows furrow.

I thought they were beautiful, I think to myself.

“I thought they were beautiful,” I tell Claire.

At home, my mother prepares meals for my father, herself and my monster and I. When no one is looking, I feed him the asparagus that I dislike, and he wipes my dirty chin with one extended claw. We giggle and my mother smiles at my father's bitter expression. I reach across the table for the pepper shaker, almost knocking over a glass of milk on the way. My father raises a hand to swat at mine, his intent not inherently harmful. Nonetheless, my monster scales my extended arm, shrieking in a painful high pitch, and bites the thumb clean off my father's hand. His claws dig into my wrist as I scream, and my father falls clumsily from his chair. He holds the bleeding stub away from his tightly sealed eyes.

My parents rarely speak to me after that. My mother brings food to my room at mealtimes and hurries off when she hears my footsteps approach the door. During the nights, I cry. Heavy tears, tears as thick as blood travel down my cheeks until they are stained. In the mirror watching my bed, the shadow of my monster begins to warp into something of an outline. His malicious smile becomes more prominent by the day, and the shoulder he hunches over begins to feel swollen, like a weight that hides in the crevasse of my collar bone.

One evening, hesitantly, I ask him,

“Why won't you leave my shoulder?”

I watch his eyes darken, but I continue, nonetheless.

“Why won't you protect another little girl? I can't be the only one that needs you.”

He doesn't respond, but his eyes trace a line down my neck. My heart jumps through the walls of my chest. For the first time, his talons seem positioned a little too close to the edge of my face. I look away, the pace of my rising chest quickening, painfully aware of his warm breath on my ear. Several agonising moments pass in quiet. I pretend to await his response, though I'm sure my heartbeat gives me away. Instead, he claws himself deeper into the rat's nest that has become my hair. He won't brush it anymore. Not since I stopped petting him.

Alone in my room, my image in the mirror no longer makes sense. It's twisted and bitter and all distorted. Long strands of black lick at my reflection, at my hands and at my face. They rarely touch the monster though. His eyes threaten the dark ribbons that dare to come close, and he shreds the rest with his awaiting talons.

At school, the children avoid my desk. They form a path around my boldly placed chair, their little legs and lunchboxes hitting the sides of tables and walls as they run by. Bruises and bumps, they agree, are affordable consequences, so long as they may avoid my table. It's placed strategically in the middle of the classroom, where the teacher anticipates the presence of a single friend. But I don't like the children in my class, and they dislike me just as much. All I see is a line of ants, marching around something they find particularly unappealing.

Claire had missed school the day after our encounter at her house. The children anguished at her desertion. I'm pretty sure one even cried.

Today, she comes to school wearing a purple toque atop her head. This makes me upset, again, I'm not sure why. She sits at her desk, four rows ahead of me. I glare at the back of her neck until I'm sure I've seared an image of my hate into her skin. The teacher walks up to the desk, and after some convincing, Claire removes the toque. A blonde, professionally styled pixie cut decorates her head. I can't help but giggle and her ears turn red as she hears me. She looks ridiculous.

Rapidly, seemingly out of impulse, she leans to the boy in the seat to her right and whispers into his ear. She looks back at me tauntingly before resuming, a newfound persistence in her voice. I stop laughing and my hands clench into fists below my desk. The boy turns around and stares me straight in

the eyes, a wide, cruel smile expanding on his face. From there, the pair cover the classroom with their rumour. One after the next, every student exchanges a shocked look with another, then stares me in the face before giggling and passing back their response. Something red and hot climbs my chest, all the way up to my ears and I feel the hairs on my neck stand up straight, waking my monster. My breathing comes in gasps, and I feel something moving in the pit of my stomach. Faces turn towards me, pink with laughter, their giggles drowned out by a high-pitched noise coming from the back of my head. I clench my teeth, hard. I feel my fingernails dig into my skin, ripping at the flesh and oozing large drops of red that stain my white ironed sleeves. Their laughter is all around. Faces meld into one, and my vision blurs down the sides. It focuses on one smiling blonde girl sitting perfectly front and centre, whispering again, to the boy beside her.

I see my teacher has left the room.

Unclenching my jaw, I step out of my seat, and make my way to the front of the class. With each row I pass, a haunting silence pulls the grins from the student's faces, and they follow the fixated track of my glower to Claire. My shining black performance shoes squeak on the smoothly waxed floor, and a trail of red litters the ground behind me. Drop after drop, blood trickles from my open fingertips.

"You've been telling lies."

Claire tenses up in front of me.

"I have not."

A searing pain shoots behind my left eye, or is it anger? I stumble towards her and grab hold of the pink ribbon around the collar of her shirt. Her fingers tear at mine, trying to release my sewn grasp. I hear a chorus of flustered gasps and excited squeals behind me. I watch as the blood from my fingers dyes the fabric of her white button up, following the channels made from the fibres of cotton, all the way down to her formal blue skirt.

Her big, scared blue eyes taunt me.

"Lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies, lies," I spit.

"You've been telling lies." I gasp it out between clenched teeth.

Fat tears roll down her cheeks, and snot drips into her open, sobbing mouth.

"What did you say," I demand. I squeeze her chubby arm with my fingernails, and she howls.

After a moment of bawling, a calm, menacing look crossed her once flustered face. Her eyebrows relax and she smiles an evil smile despite her inferior positioning.

"I told them the truth.

I told them how you bit the finger right off your daddy's hand and ate it. And now your parents lock you up in your room like a dog and won't let you come out because they don't want you to eat the rest of them."

She hisses out that last bit.

A blinding sort of silence surrounds me. I let go of her shirt and she drops back into the chair, wiping her rattled face with a whole arm. I feel something wet drip from my eye, down my cheek. I don't want to fight anymore. Her mouth moves now, talking to the children around me, but I don't hear the words she says. I feel my monster stir from the back of my neck. Cold claws scale my shoulders, pushing past his nest of tangled hair and towards the front of my chest. He stretches an arm out in front of him. I notice how he's grown in size.

My head drops and my monster pushes off.

I cover my eyes. He rips out her throat.

An orchestra of screaming overtakes the classroom,

Claire doesn't scream.

I'm drenched in warm blood. It washes away my own, and pools around my feet. The sound of flesh, being rhythmically torn from a person's neck, is something difficult to describe.

Afterwards, I make my way home. My monster pets my head, his long talons massaging my scalp. I feel empty; I let him soothe me. I walk away from the river's edge, not daring a glance at my reflection. Though, my efforts soon fall to nothing. A paper sized package waits for me at the front door. I timidly split open the top, careful not to drop any dried blood into the opening. I pull out a laminated black and white photo, our class photo. I examine the document from my bed. I should be in the middle row, in the far-left corner. My face twists in confusion. I'm nowhere to be found. I notice the student who stands beside my empty square has inched away from where I should be, cowering behind the person to their right. The girl behind me does the same, learning much too far back, eyeing the empty space where I should stand. I look more closely. Almost directly above where I'm missing, hovering over my invisible shoulder, I spy the chilling, violent smile of my monster, floating, eyes bulging over the children below me. My hands start to shake. I feel my chest rise and fall rapidly, my monster exhales over my ear. I raise my eyes slowly to the mirror in front of my bed. I'm gone. The reflection is black, completely empty except for the two petrifying eyes and the wide unnerving smile of the creature who hides, like a parasite, behind my neck. Any innocent noise that normally, I would pay no mind to, silences itself utterly. The light that so boldly paraded itself through my open room seems to retreat from my window, not daring so much as a glance from behind the darkening curtains. The class photo drops from between my open fingers. I don't bother trying to save it. I feel so foolish, but I won't allow myself to cry.

Instead, through the mirror, I watch his eyes. Neither of us breathe. A cold sensation smooths my wildly beating heart.

Slowly, I raise my right hand and place it on the scruff of his neck, my left one on top.

Calmly, threateningly, he protracts his claws, centimetres from my throat.

A sob slips through my sealed lips.

He bows his feathered head.

I gather my strength, what's left of it, and I pull.

I'll tear him off of me, even if I have to lose my shoulder to do it.

His claws grip into my exposed skin as I frantically heave upwards.

Fat chunks of flesh and muscle fly from my shoulder. My knees buckle under me, my feet spasm, voicing my agony. I beg and I scream, and I keep pulling. He tears my ear with his sharpened teeth. I howl as I feel it detach from my head and land atop my bare foot. Red and black pain blinds my vision. His high pitch wails puncture my remaining eardrum, and I weep in response. My arms grow weak, but still I pull.

At some point, I have left my room. Darkness surrounds us. I look into the mirror once again. I know I feel the blood, the hooks in my shoulder, the excruciating hurt. I can feel the regret. I can feel my father's terror, and Claire's boiling hatred. I can feel the simple woman on the bus's aching jealousy, but still, my reflection smiles back.

Only, it isn't quite my smile. It's much too wide, much too thin, much too chilling, too menacing, too ghastly, eerie, too horrible.

Oh,

I see...