

Scary Visions

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(Title, and theme of 'Nightmares' provided by Sandy Douglas on my Facebook page)

She was trying to cool her coffee, but the fire came back again. Her gums ripped with the expanding fangs, and her black shoes changed into hooves. There was no longer a café; and the beverage on the table had begun to stink of copper. Somewhere, a woman screamed...
...about toast going cold. It was urgent: chilled toast was *outlawed* in the kingdom of Breaking Fasts.

(What?!)

Yes! There was to be a meeting at the town hall, because apparently someone had found schoolbags growing legs and skulking under furniture; awaiting their chance to bite unsuspecting ankles and spit impossible homework across freshly cleaned floors. As she looked down at her hands, she realised they had also metamorphosed into giant claws that dropped balls at every opportunity (because they never learned about discipline). The only thing they were good for now was painting with stolen varnish in a fetching shade of...

“So have you READ it?”

“What...?”

“The part of my contract that says I have to put up with your slovenly ways and sense of entitlement! Why the devil do I bother?!”

“No idea...” said Marilyn, stumbling out of bed and away from her mother’s wrath.

From the other side, motherhood was more frightening than any dream. One grew cloven feet just trying to sort out laundry; familiar landscapes could become claustrophobic and fraught with danger at any time.

Sometimes there was no safehouse. At others, everything seemed so perfect that Marilyn entertained the nagging feeling a door would burst open and the grim reaper himself appear to cut down all those she cared about with abandon.

But one survivor, alone to bear the sole responsibility of remorse and memory – a bereft mother sifting through happy faces in a merry-go-round of pain, trying to decipher which sign she missed...confirm that their fate was indeed her fault.

Yet all this morbid musing must be pushed aside! A long succession of joy built up; cherished, carefully planned and implemented. Children must not know how double-edged a mother's love can be. They must not guess how many hours she sat there, praying that she may trade her longevity for their continued happiness. This is too great a burden, too onerous a knowledge to impart.

Had Marilyn's own mother felt like this? Was it a relief to succumb to death - to lay down this constant worry, and trust that by her leaving this life early she was somehow assuring her offspring would prevail?

'A brief but courageous fight with cancer' it had said in the paper. But which bit had taken the most courage?

Marilyn often thought back to how her mother scolded her, realising now the fears the older woman was trying to suppress. Marilyn felt ashamed of her flippant remarks, or (worse) outright defiance, now hearing in the echoes of motherly admonishment the harsh truths that were being battled against.

Maternity was bound up in fragrant sheets, gingham aprons and each well-scrubbed panful of comforting food, in Marilyn's mind. It was an ideal she aspired to, but was always struggling to attain. Healthy plants did not festoon Marilyn's windowsills, no roses peeped in at her doors.

Her mum's aging cat preferred to dine at the neighbours' rather than stay and stare at the part where the cracked lino met the grubby baseboards, while forcing down something out of a tin. Marilyn was glad that felines knew how to look after themselves and had an innate ability to demand the best that life could offer. The parenting magazines said that was how *Marilyn* should be, that her baby would be better off with a mother that knew about 'me time'

and pampering. Was that the *real* reason a new baby should be kept away from a cat? Not a smothering concern at all, rather a fear that maybe a cat would embarrass the new mother by taking charge and doing an all-round better bloody job...?

Marilyn knew that she was moving slower than the rest of the world: hiding in the house when the Spring weather was glorious and her child should be revelling in the delights of fresh air; making excuses to turn down people who invited themselves over, wanting to coo over her child; ignoring her mobile any time the caller ID said that it was one of her mother's sisters - because she just couldn't bear to hear *one more time* how proud they all were of her, and then how they would 'just' do that pile dishes for her...

Society was too tricky to negotiate, recently. One never knew how much was enough: when one's spotlight was truly at rest. Or when a critical review might ruin one's whole week...

"How far are you hoping to run with ol' *Shakespeare*, then? He's ancient, you know - he hasn't got much mileage left"

"What...?"

"Your musings. You're depressing me"

Marilyn shifted in her seat, a little embarrassed that she'd bothered to articulate her thoughts. What would *Suzy* know about the trials of motherhood - in her kitten heels, on a freaking Tuesday?

Plus, Marilyn had made a *choice*, hadn't she? Better to suck it up and lie. That was what they expected, anyway, these non-kid-infested people.

It's what Marilyn had expected *before*, too...

1. Don't gush unless I let you.
2. Don't show more than 3 pictures per outing.
3. Don't complain unless I do. (Oh, and you plan to go *straight* back to work. Like, in 3 days or something. Because that's being a *proper* member of society, who *contributes*)
4. Don't make me feel like my taxes are paying for you to live.

5. Don't even *suggest* that your husband might be able to pay for your upkeep for more than a day or two. (Cos that makes you *lucky* and *different* and therefore cancels out your RIGHT to complain *ever*.)
6. Don't wear frumpy clothes.
7. Don't make out you are more tired than me...because then we'll get in a big competition, where I'll make you feel incensed (without permission to vent here because I won't understand anyway...)

Marilyn used to have fun with Suzy. They used to have secrets and observations and gossip and...they didn't bore each other.

The baby started to cry, and Marilyn took it as a cue to leave. Suzy answered a call on her mobile from her boss, as baby things were gathered. Her perfumed air kiss landed nowhere near Marilyn's cheek.

Her fingernails were ridiculously tiny, and scrabbled so urgently on Marilyn's skin in the night, that it made the anxiety spike. Would the baby be this frantic if Marilyn was fulfilling all her needs?

Should she not be content to lie away from her mother, in that contraption 'the expectant couple' built together (through a hail of crossed words - stopping once for Marilyn's tears, and many times for declarations that the manufacturers were sadistic jokers)?

It attached to the bed now. It had been set to the right height. Marilyn could still reach her arm over and offer a finger to hold, or arm to caress...but the baby was not impressed.

The baby needed *all* of her mother. Not just the breast and the milk and the promise of clean clothes and nappies – the baby wanted to be enveloped in her mother's scent, to peek under clothes with small digits in every fold of skin around an armpit; tapping in a random sequence.

Those waving little arms when (she *did* sleep) were hoping to make contact with a warm patch of skin that was not her own, but still an extension of her: an anchor to the familiar, an assurance that all was well.

Those deep blue eyes saw things differently, seemed to promise to give Marilyn clarity, if only she would take the time to look. In that young soul lay reality in all its permutations...but that was frightening, and Marilyn did not have the strength to face it all alone.

Roy made the biggest groan yet, and a meaty arm just missed the top of the baby's head on its unconscious rise from the covers. He had become an eternally irritated version of the speaking clock in the last five weeks, as if Marilyn really needed to have the transfixing green digits on the radio alarm translated as "too bloody early for this shite" multiple times a week. The single bed in what would become the baby's room (in just a few short months, as the Health Visitor liked to remind her) was always cold, but the little squiggly body next to her was a comfort. If Marilyn put on the dressing gown and wrapped the ties away so they weren't a choking hazard, she did ok. It was not a comfortable night, but then it wasn't ever going to be...

The phone beeped in her ear again, she adjusted her headset and blew on her coffee to cool it for a second before saying the company spiel. The customer started to explain the problem she was having with her account. There was a strange coppery odour coming from the cup.

Marilyn began to feel hot, and her gums started to hurt in a familiar way. It became harder to talk, as the pain grew more intense, and Marilyn's feet also started to throb. Marilyn motioned for a manager to take over her headset and stumbled to the window for air. The fire alarm went off and a mother, caught in the flames that suddenly sprang up all around, tossed Marilyn a baby to save. The hooves made her stumble, the frantic baby was slipping from her growing claws...the mother was screaming...

"Marilyn!! It's bloody 5am! Calm that child down before she wakes the whole goddamn street!" Roy was shaking his wife, hard. He never understood about how tender breasts felt when they were full. He just replied that he never got to feel them anymore, so how would he know? Marilyn winced as she took her deadened arm out from underneath the baby, and raised the other one to block out the glaring bulb her husband had helpfully ignited above her head. "You look like hell" Roy went on "I don't think you breastfeeding is doing any of us any good."

“Like babies miraculously sleep through and don’t need a cuddle or change or feed in the middle of the night when they’re on formula” muttered Marilyn.

“What?” asked Roy, already half dressed for work

“Nothing, dear” said Marilyn.

“Oh. I’m going in early to sort the papers again. I’ll try to be back for dinner. What are we having tonight?”

Marilyn looked at him, the baby now gulping noisily inside her nightie, and lazily wondered which angle she’d have to throw the *What To Expect When You’re Expecting* book at, to give Roy’s brain enough of a jolt to change his personality. “I haven’t decided yet” she said.

Roy let out a sigh and shook his head before banging out of the room, which startled the baby to tears again.

The Health Visitor, Meghan, didn’t like having to still be doing home visits to Marilyn after 5 weeks, and made no attempt to hide this fact on her last harassed drop in. Marilyn could feel herself becoming more of a burden than she was ‘allowed’ to be, so had agreed to go along to the local breastfeeding group and get the baby weighed there, instead.

Marilyn took ages the night before: choosing the baby’s outfit, and spare clothes; ironing them carefully to look as though she was coping; laying out the muslin cloths with the nicest designs on them, and then giving them a quick iron too, just to be thorough. She spent even longer worrying about what *she* was going to wear. Where was her best pair of leggings? Was that nice top, that covered her bottom, clean...?

Marilyn did not end up with use of the car as she had planned, and the journey was mostly uphill; coupled with being over a mile long. The rain had arrived after a long dry spell, and there was a rather a sharp wind that came with it. The baby refused to let her little limbs be guided into any of her layers, drooling and screaming until her cute little t-shirt was looking the worse for wear, and her mother was in tears, too.

Marilyn eventually staggered into the community centre about fourteen minutes late: her hair dishevelled past any hint of its former style, her patience beyond the point of no return. She

felt inches from a full on meltdown, but it appeared that her child was willing to upstage her in that department: little fists balled against the confines of her pram, lungs vibrating with impossibly loud cries that echoed off the three sets of heavy glass fire doors Marilyn had to navigate to get to the designated room.

There was a hum of voices as Marilyn stood in the last corridor, exhausted and trying desperately to remember how to function in public. As if guided by the scent of abject terror, Meghan swung into view and reached for the pram.

“Deary me, little one!” she exclaimed with a chuckle, “You sound like you need a boobie or two, anyway!” she put a reassuring arm around Marilyn’s back and gave her a quick squeeze “well done for venturing out here, I know it is rather rubbish weather today, but I was hoping I’d see you. Follow me and I’ll introduce you to the group” Marilyn hung back and started trying to pat down her hair “oh, don’t worry about that, we’re all mums here, it’s not a beauty contest” the Health Visitor smiled, but she quickly smoothed a few tendrils off Marilyn’s forehead, anyway “try and smile for me Marilyn, I promise you’ll not get eaten”.

The room was pleasantly busy, a few toddlers staggering about showing each other dribbled-on toys, and plastic seats for the grown ups arranged in a semi circle. Most of the chairs were occupied by women in various stages of the feeding process, all seeming quite uncomfortably positioned, but pretty relaxed with each other. They looked up and smiled as Marilyn approached.

“This is Marilyn!” beamed Meghan “bubs is 6 weeks old, so I’ve forced her into our midst...but I know you ladies will look after them. Would you like a tea, Marilyn? You take it white, don’t you?” Marilyn nodded, and Meghan swept off.

Two of the women in the chairs looked at each other, and the one with the smallest baby moved up so that there was a seat in the middle. “There you go” she said “park yourself there and let us see your wee cutie” Marilyn released her baby from the pram (she had stopped screaming since she could hear other voices around her) and the two women cooed in unison.

“Aww, look at her wee face, she has such big eyes! What’s her name?”

“She’s so long for only being 6 weeks, the feeding must be going well!”

Marilyn settled between the women, and smiled in spite of herself “her name’s Rima” she said “she was in the 90th percentile for her length, but I always think she’s tiny! We’re doing ok with feeding, I think, but it’s quite hard work”

“Oh definitely!” agreed the lady with the smaller baby, “Jenny and I were just saying that until you get to about 12 weeks it can feel like your life is just full of boobing and no sleep!”

“Yeah, 12 weeks was when I cracked lying down to feed. It’s a game changer!” smiled Jenny “Becks, you said you did it one night by accident around the 6 week mark, didn’t you?”

“Yup! I was EXHAUSTED and just COULDN’T sit up. So I got Jim to promise to try and stay awake and help me position wee Luca...and that was it! Have you tried it, Marilyn?”

“No, I am still a bit scared I suffocate her, I think. She seems to bury her nose in my skin so much!” said Marilyn, surprised by how relaxed she was about unhooking her bra in the middle of a roomful of other people, without a cover and while talking to strangers.

“Here you go!” trilled Meghan from behind Marilyn “I have a tea here for you. When you’re ready I’ll swap you for bubs. Can’t say fairer than that, eh Marilyn?!”

“No, you can’t!” grinned Marilyn

As Jenny and Becks chatted through all things breastfeeding and birth related, and the babies eyed each other with interest on that rainy afternoon, Marilyn began to feel safer and more capable than she had in all the long months of pregnancy and grief.

She caught Meghan casting proud looks across the room many times over the next few sessions at the group, and through her two new friends Marilyn soon began to get to know most of the regulars.

That Christmas Meghan received a large candle in the shape of two white wings from Marilyn. *To Meghan* the tag read *Thank you for reaching into my darkness, slaying my demons and putting an end to the nightmare of loneliness and grief. You are truly my angel. Merry Christmas, love Marilyn XXX*

(2,895 words)