

# LITTLE ONCE

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It didn't cry much past its sixth month; that seemed to be when it learnt what the slaps meant. On the other hand, it refused to die. She couldn't bring herself to kill it directly; somehow she just couldn't. Maybe that was the last gasp of the Catholic in her. Of all the commandments to get stuck on, why that one? She didn't keep any of the rest.

She tried leaving it out on the balcony in the snow—the balcony, that little strip of a thing about a foot wide with an iron railing just beyond it. Just an excuse to up the rent, she thought; no person of a decent size could stand on that little fragment of floor. She had been angry with the balcony since she moved into the ninth-floor apartment, just before she had—the thing. So one night when the snow was falling, she wrapped the thing in a light blanket—without a blanket it would be too plain, somehow—and put it carefully on the balcony, in the wet. Wouldn't it be lovely, just, if it squirmed a little and happened to slip through the railings? A fall like that. Its little head might burst open. Nobody in the street below would know which apartment it came from.

When she opened the window in the morning, pulling her robe tighter against the cold and watching her breath mist—and that was another thing, not enough shillings for the heater, and here she was letting out all that paid-for warm, when would the thing stop leeching off her?—it lay there with snow in its blanket and ice in its black hair, and it stared at her. Such a pale little thing. Not a bit like its gypsy da. Horrible yellow eyes, now whose fault was that?

She wasn't sure if it were alive or not. It shouldn't be, of course, just as it shouldn't have lived through that week when she didn't feed it. If she closed her eyes and gave it a little push with the toe of her slipper, wouldn't it just slide over the edge? And then she could move. That snoopy nosy parker, Mrs. O'Malley next door, was always threatening to report her to the child welfare authorities.

It blinked. After that she had to fetch it in. Couldn't kick it, could she, not over the edge, anyway. She took it in and gave it a few slaps for making her lose the warm air. It made a tear or two, but it had learned not to yell. Leave it in the same diapers all day, see if that taught it anything. Lock it up in the closet.

By suppertime she relented. She brought it out and changed it and fed it some nice hot soup. Maybe a little too hot but it could learn to blow, couldn't it, then? She patted its head. It leaned against her hand and closed its eyes. Almost like a cat. She'd had a kitten once, when she was little. What a soft tiny thing, and making the sweetest noises, like a funny music box, warm against her. Da broke its neck one night because it clawed him.

She picked the thing up and held it against her. Warm, phaw! but what a smell! What was the use in changing it when it always made another mess? She couldn't go

on like this. The paper didies were killing her. And the neighbors. "What's its name? Ooh, isn't it a charming one." Fat lot they knew. Couldn't keep their noses out of other people's business, could they? Bloody great cows.

She was carting it along like a packet one day in Petticoat Lane—usually she left it home; but that day, she just had the impulse; and, as little as it ate, it hardly weighed anything—when the gypsy woman came nagging after her.

The old creature wore a flowered scarf over her hair, a man's tweed suit-jacket, trousers, and plimsolls. "A mother, are you? A nice mother? A sweet little mother?" said the woman, tugging on her coat.

"Shab off, old cow," she said, jerking her coat out of the old woman's hand.

"Dosta want it, the wee one?"

She glanced at the old thing's pinched face. The permanent squint in the eyes lifted the lip so one could see the gold front tooth. Had the creature ever been alive and young? "What's your game, ma?" she asked.

"If you was to find the babe a burden, if you was to lighten your purse fifty quid, say, and lighten the load as well, if you was wanting such a thing, fine lady—?"

She glanced about. In the pell-mell of the open air market—shoppers rushing, folk hawking, singing out their wares, racks of clothes lining the walks, booths where knives in jeweled sheaths and leather goods and cheap finery hung—no one looked toward her and the old woman. "What are you on about? You with the Yard?"

"Oh, no, lady," said the creature, darting glances both ways. "Not a bit of it."

"What would you do with it?" She glanced at the thing. Its yellow eyes were fixed on the old woman. "You wouldn't snuff it, would you?"

"No. No," said the creature, staring into the thing's eyes. "I'd send it off somewhere else. It'd be safe and lively, lady. It'd be gone. Mayhap fifteen years down the road, it'd come back; but oh, you'll be away by then, eh, lady?"

She'd meant to spend the money on a new handbag and a good pair of lined leather gloves, what with winter coming on. But if the little thing were gone—think of the savings in didies alone. She'd save her tips up and soon have enough for a pair of gloves again. With the thing gone, maybe she could bring a man home again; and a man gave presents, sometimes. She could say she'd sent it off to be with relatives. She'd been planning to say that for ages; and it would be true, too; so far as she knew, all her relatives were dead, Da being the last to kick off.

There in the center of the market, with the action and noise all around them, time seemed to slow. She handed the thing to the old gypsy woman. She counted out money, the last pound in loose shillings. She turned and walked away, the quiet following her.

It was snowing the night it came back.

She had been on and on at the landlord about the caulking around the windows.

All the cold seemed to come in, especially around the windows leading to the balcony. Every winter she complained. Some years he sent somebody by to take a look, but the handyman would always just say there was nothing off about it, she must be a bloody lunatic. So she shivered through the nights. There were not enough blankets in the world to keep her warm, she sometimes thought.

She was huddling in the blankets, drinking tea with a splash of gin, when the knock came.

She thought it might be Harry. She didn't really care who it might be. "Come," she said, and sipped tea.

And it was the monster. But for the yellow eyes, she wouldn't have known it. From such a little bit of a thing it had grown so big. She looked at it and felt all the years on her, each like a weight crushing her down, and the cold that had seeped so deep inside her it never left.

"I'm tired," she said.

It came in and sat down and stared at her. It looked so much like Da, but they all did after a while, all the monsters the world called men.

"You were little once," she said. Then she laughed a terrible laugh that did not end.