

# An Ugly Thing

By Aimee Hart

**(A story of fragmented memories and of survival. This story contains triggering topics, such as sexual assault against minors, death, and rape).**

The first time you taste blood in your mouth you're wearing your Mr Tickle shirt.

It's a metallic tang that sticks to your teeth like pink candy floss, bitten into until the pink is tarnished a ruby red that stains your lips until you resemble something monstrous, a girl maybe.

"Lift up your shirt." He says. Or he probably says. You are still not sure.

The ping of the microwave makes you tremble and you *keep* trembling when your fingers, small, Wotsit-stained and sausage-like, trace the orange, tangled arms of Mr Tickle and clutch him against you.

"Mate, you in the kitchen?"

He puts a finger to his lips. He traces it around the cracked skin of his mouth, catching flakes of skin like raindrops and pressing them to your mouth. Into your mouth until his finger is soaked red and blood dribbles down your chin.

"Yeah I am! Was that your Balti that just went off?"

"Yeah! Be a mate and grab it for me will ya? Aunt Marg's just getting me a beer and my hands are full with Frankie."

He looks at you and he smiles. You probably smile back, small lips stretched into a clown's grin against strong, thick fingers.

You probably don't even remember your back hitting the counter, the pain shooting up your spine like Jack's beanstalk, starting at the bottom and spreading its roots until you don't feel anything at all. You probably don't even remember him reaching over, groin pressed right onto Mr Tickle's face and grabbing the curry. You probably don't even remember the rich smell of the curry or the ice that sat in your stomach, a cold replacement meal. You probably don't even remember when he returns and tracks his fingers over Mr Tickle's eyes until your eyes sting and your skin feels like crawling jellied eels.

You probably don't even remember when he leaves and they find you: an ugly little thing, eyes pinned to the floor, nails sharp against the laminated floor and the sound of the Tweenies rerun a distant, distorted sound of static.

x-x-x

You're only 5 inches from being 5ft the second time blood gushes into your mouth and your tongue tastes salt and misery.

A loose kick had caught you by surprise. You hadn't quite expected them to turn on you so quick, grappling your hair like it was rope and swinging you so hard that when you felt that small little fist

connect with your stomach it felt like you were a bird who's wing was clipped, falling short and landing on the tarmac – bloodied and bruised.

Afterwards Mom takes one look at you and tuts. She spreads her fingers over the gash and prods it with something that smells like deterrent but probably isn't until you wince and yank your head away, hissing. All you do is make her prod harder until you have to bite on your lip, already a vermilion red.

"I don't know why you let those kids treat you that way." She says as though it's your fault your face is as red and bruised as a mouldy apple. "You're braver than that."

You grunt. She looks at you, really looks at you, and without warning pulls you into her warm arms and buries her face into your neck. Her body wracks like she's being hit again and again and it is only when the thought of fingers in your mouth flickers like a flame to the front of your mind do you snap to attention and hold her back.

x-x-x

You dream.

This time the blood runs down your chin and soaks your shirt pink. It's a colour that they had once goaded you with, told you that you had to wear, to label yourself as something that their perspective could understand. You were not allowed to be the wolf, only the sheep with pink frills in your fur and lace entwined in your horns.

You pad through rivulets of moss that soak your socks, thin strands clinging to your ankles as you walk further and further down a path that won't stop changing. Sometimes it's boiling hot bricks that burn your feet, other times it's cold and icy and it is too much to walk on and yet the worst one is when the path runs out and splits into two and both of them look too monstrous to walk down.

x-x-x

"Get back up."

You stare up at them and bare your teeth, defiant in the harsh light of the torch in your face. They kneel down next to you and grab your chin, squeezing until the blood from your nose drips onto the palm of their hands.

"You're stronger than this."

You turn your face away and refuse to believe.

x-x-x

The good doctor wipes the blood from your fingers and suddenly you breathe again. A current of oxygen that sends you dizzy and causes you to slump against the warm body beside you, blood rushing in your ears and the sound of the doctor's pen tapping out a beat against the cold cushion of the waiting bed.

“What would you like to tell her?” You can barely hear the question over the rushing sound but it is there and while you can’t hear you can feel, in fact sometimes you think you maybe feel too much. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?

You feel too much. That’s always been a problem.

What would you like to tell her? A figment of you that’s been hurt and torn and tormented? What would you tell her?

Things you would *like* to tell her:

- It’s going to get better
- You make it
- Everyone believed you
- Nobody doubted you for a second
- I love you

The doctor looks at you until you have no choice but to look back.

You go to open your mouth but the words clog in your throat like tar.

x-x-x

She’s still sat beside you the night everything changes and you lie half dead on a lumpy old sofa, head burning and eyes attempting to adjust to the darkness of a room that holds stacks and stacks of art. It is like they are wedged in every corner around, bits and pieces of paint and ink that aren’t yet finished but complete the room with a homeliness that you’ve not felt since you were a child. The girl would love it here if only she would look up and stop crying.

You taste the cheap forgotten whiskey on your tongue the moment you move up to retch the remnants of last night’s mistakes onto the floor. It feels like a knife is being pressed to your throat, choking you until your body wracks and exhaustion embraces you like a lover to bring you back down to tatty old earth.

A sting of skin against your knuckles makes you jerk and then she is there – a stranger that touches your bloodied knuckles and brings them to her lap and keeps you still.

She is starlight and her eyes make the cracked blood of your knuckles, the crying girl and the ugliness of a single moment suddenly seem irrelevant to everything you’ve ever thought or felt.

“You threw up on my floor.” She says, hair short and darker than pitch that contrasts beautifully against her pale skin. “Thanks for that by the way. No idea how I’m going to explain that one to the landlady.”

Shame’s always been there for you, the best friend you’ve never really had. The only friend that’s there when you’re at your lowest, the only friend to take your hand and drag you even lower to the sea bed.

“Sorry.” He returns now, cracks you open and burrows inside and teases you until closing your eyes is better than opening them. “Sorry, I...I don’t know where I am. Where am...”

“You’re somewhere safe.”

Safe from what you want to ask. From yourself? If you were her you would have tied you up, made sure you would never leave. Never do anything to risk the ugly truth spilling out of you like blood from a wound.

Instead you ask who she is. She doesn't give a name. Says she saw you bleeding (when have you ever stopped bleeding?) in a gutter and felt sorry for you. Maybe she's right to. Maybe you feel sorry for you too.

You always feel too much. That's always been the problem with you.

x-x-x

You dream.

There is no blood this time. No crossroads. Just the girl and the woman with stars in her eyes and kindness in her soul. This time you're not sure which is worse – the uncertainty of a future or the uncertainty of a past.

x-x-x

You wake.

There is still blood on your knuckles but there is a number too, scrawled in pen with a font that looks more like a chicken scratch than actual writing. You wonder for a moment if maybe you press down hard enough if it will bleed like an actual scratch does.

The silver slit of the moon against your face is a cold companion in the bed that once belonged to your mother. It touches you with an indifference that you feel like the world in general regards you with – that in reality the world doesn't care for you, that it will still keep spinning with or without you. That's why the moon is always alone, you think, because it is confident in itself to survive with just itself for company.

You wonder what that's like. Reassurance of yourself. Confidence.

It doesn't seem real.

x-x-x

For the first time in a long time you are blood-free and she, starlight, notices immediately.

"You clean up nice!" She exclaims and you feel her gaze on your dress, purple to match with her blue, and heat blossoms up over your legs and arms until it flushes your cheeks. It feels so familiar to shame it catches you by surprise when the feeling is pleasurable and makes it easier to ignore the girl that shuffles on behind you, face still pressed down.

The smell of weed clings to the bar's stool you end up sitting on and you wrinkle your nose until she laughs and throws an arm around you, shielding you from the icy winds that still stubbornly refuse to move on even during February. It is an excuse for her to get closer you assume and you find that you don't mind too much. That you prefer it to the girl's company. That she's prettier to look than that pitiful, ugly thing that usually follows you around.

She talks and you listen. She talks about a lot of things. Art for one, and the fact you don't look as bloody now. That she can actually see your eyes now without all that blood in them. That they are as wide as the moon.

You snort into your untouched cocktail and glare at the shining white orb glaring at you from outside.

“Well I guess I am a loner like the moon.”

“Alone? The moon isn’t alone you nerd, she’s got friends. She’s got family.”

“Nerd? You’re the one gendering the bloody moon, moron. And giving it a family too!”

She smiles around the rim of her glass of rum and coke, a classless drink for a classy lady. “Don’t you know what stars are? That’s the moons friends and family. The moon is never alone. Isn’t that cool?”

You think that’s when you probably fall for her. Something as simple as that.

The moon is never alone. Isn’t that cool?

x-x-x

On nights when the girl’s tears are reminiscent to swirling storms and raging seas she holds you close, fingers pawing through your hair and lips touching the thin, translucent skin of your ear. Sometimes she buries her nose in your neck like your mother once did when she couldn’t save you from yourself, but this time there is no guilt of not being what people wanted you to be – there is only an overwhelming amount of relief.

“It’s okay to cry.” So you cry.

“It’s okay to feel broken.” So you stop putting yourself back together.

“It’s okay to not be strong.” So you allow yourself to be weak.

“Just remember: it’s not your fault.” So you look up and while salt is still streaming down your cheeks and your chest burns from the pressure of something you can’t rid away no matter how hard you try, you take the girl by the hand and pull her into your bed and stroke her eyes until they stop leaking.

“It’s not your fault.” You whisper to her and she trembles and preens in your arms.

You’ve always known it’s not your fault. Everyone’s told you.

It’s just the first time you’ve heard it from your own mouth.

x-x-x

“What would you like to tell her? If she was standing in front of you right now, what would you like to say to her?” The good doctor once again says, her mouth thin and her eyes narrowed. Expectations low.

You feel her hand in yours, as light as stars, when you turn to look at the girl you held all night, finally looking back up at you with eyes as green as emeralds and tight, curly brown locks that go well with her Mr Tickle shirt.

Things you would *like* to tell her:

- It’s going to get better
- You make it
- Everyone believed you
- Nobody doubted you for a second
- I love you

Things you *do* tell her:

- You **survive**.