

MAY MALONE

by David Almond

The story was that May Malone had a monster in her house. She kept it in chains. If you went round to the back of the house and put your ear to the wall you'd hear it groaning. You'd hear it howling at night if you listened hard. There were tales about May and a priest from Blyth. There was a baby, it was said, but the baby was horrible because it was born from such a sin. Even weirder tales were whispered. The devil himself had come to May and it was the son of Satan living in her house. She's been with horses, with dogs, with goats. Anyway, whatever it was you'd risk your body, your sanity and probably your soul if you got too close.

Norman Trench was ten or eleven at the time. He lived in the new flats in Felling Square. May's house was at the bottom end of Crimea Terrace, not far from the

muddy green where the lads played football.

Norman's mam tightened her lips when he asked her about it.

"Them daft tales! Tek tae notice. What's done is done. Just keep away and leave her be."

To look at May, you'd never think she had a monster. She was getting on, but she wore tight skirts, she dyed her hair, and she wore high heels that clicked and clacked on the pavements as she hurried along. She was lapsed. Everybody knew the tale of how she'd stood up in church in the middle of Mass and yelled that the priest was a lyin bliddy bastard twat, then stormed down the aisle, spat at the altar, and never went again.

You could see people's faces closing down as she hurried through the streets. She hardly spoke to anybody and you could see that nobody wanted to speak to her. Except for some of the blokes, of course, the ones who sighed as she came near, and who couldn't help following with their eyes when she passed by.

Norman was a miserable kind of kid. Aye, he had some reasons – the brother that'd died at three years old, a dad that'd gone wrong with the drink and ended up in

clink. But everybody's got something to put up with. Norman was just the kind that took it all too seriously.

People used to go, "Cheer up, man! It might never bliddy happen."

And sometimes he'd yell back. "It's happened abliddyready, right! So bugger off!"

Norman thought about illness and death and dying all the time. He thought about the devil and Hell. And those nightmares! Boiling oil and scorching flames and redhot poker and devil's horns. He told the priest in confession about it and the priest sighed. Oh dear. Such fears and dreams were common enough among his flock. We all had such a cross to bear.

He leaned closer to the grille, trying to get a proper look at Norman.

"Desolation of the heart," he said, "is often a sign of God's call. Do you ever feel you might have a vocation, my son?"

His mam had been through everything that Norman had been through, of course, and worse. The difference was she had a cheerful heart.

"Let's have a smile," she used to say, and Norman would curl his lips up and try to please her, but it just made things worse.

"Oh, son," she'd say. "Don't grow up so sad. God is good, the world is beautiful and heaven waits for us."

Made no difference. Norman believed in none of that. He was shutting down, getting ever more miserable. He couldn't stop himself, even when the lads started moaning.

"Why can't you just enjoy yourself, man? You're like a wet bliddy Monday morning."

No wonder they started to turn their backs on him, like he was May Malone, or running away from him and howling, like he was the monster.

It was October when Norman went to May's for the first time. The nights were turning cold and cutting in. He waited till dark then down he went to the end of Crimea Terrace and into the back lane. He scrambled over the wall into May's back yard. He went to the house wall and pressed his ear to it. Nothing. Maybe a radio somewhere far away. The distant voices of the lads echoing on the green. He concentrated. All he heard was his heart, then the noises of monsters inside himself. He tiptoed to the kitchen window and cupped his hands, peered in and nearly yelled with bliddy fright. But it was just his own staring eyes that goggled back at him. Nothing else.

Next time he went, though, he was sure there was a bit of grunting, a bit of squeaking. May came into the

kitchen and made a pot of tea and put some biscuits on a plate. She looked out. Norman pressed right against the back yard wall. Then she leaned up and pulled the curtains shut. Norman climbed back out again and stood in the dark at the end of the terrace. He lit the cigarette he'd bought at Wiffen's shop that he'd said was for his mam. A river bell rang. A door clicked open and shut on Crimea Terrace and footsteps hurried up towards town. He drew deeply on the cigarette. He coughed. He stood looking down through the night towards the river. All this is pitching me closer to bliddy hell, he thought.

"Where you been?" his mam said when he got back in.

"Football," he said. "With the lads."

"Good lad. That might cheer you up, eh? Or mebbe not."

He kept going back. Maybe he had it in his head that he'd be able to go to the lads and say, "It's true. There is a monster. Come and see," and that that'd sort everything out. But there was nothing, and soon the lads were taking no notice of him at all. It was like they didn't even see him, like he wasn't there. Probably they'd even forgotten all about May's monster.

Then he steps out of Wiffen's one afternoon and there's

May Malone right slap bang in front of him. She's wearing a green coat. Her eyes are green, her fingernails bright red.

"So," she says. "What have *you* got to say for yourself?"

Norman gulps.

"Come along," she says.

"Nothin, Miss Malone."

"Huh. Nothin. So would you like to see my monster?"

Norman gulps again and blinks.

"Well?"

She doesn't smile. She isn't cross. Her voice is crisp and clear.

"Yes, please, Miss Malone," he says.

"You won't want to be seen walking with me. Follow me down in five minutes or so. Come to the front door."

And away she clacks.

He smokes his fag as he walks down Crimea Terrace. He's trying to seem nonchalant.

The door's ajar.

"Don't just stand there," comes her voice from inside.

He sidles through and finds her waiting in a

narrow corridor. She goggles, gasps and claps her hands across her mouth.

“Oh no!” she says. “You are in the house of May Malone! Lightning will strike at any moment!”

Then she laughs and tells him to stop his bliddy trembling and come properly in.

Everything is neat and clean, just like she is. Her green coat is hanging from a hook on the wall. There’s a door open to a living room. He sees a couple of armchairs, a couple of ashtrays. There’s a decanter with what looks like whisky in it, and two glasses. There’s a painting of a Chinese lady on the hall wall. When May closes the front door, the hallway is deeply shadowed, and a red light shines down from upstairs.

She reaches out and takes his hand in hers. He flinches and she holds his hand a little tighter.

“Don’t worry,” she softly says. “Come with me and see.”

She leads him towards a dark door the back of the house. She hesitates.

“You won’t tell a soul, of course,” she says. “Will you?”

She squeezes his hand.

“Will you?”

“No, Miss Malone.”

“Good, for I am the one who decides who knows.”

She turns the handle of the door.

“Now you may meet my boy. His name is Alexander.”

It’s a small room. Light falls from a skylight in the ceiling. There’s a narrow bed against the wall. The boy is sitting on a small blue sofa. His head is slumped onto his shoulder.

May goes to him, kneels beside him, puts her arm around him.

“Alexander,” she whispers. “Here is a new visitor for you.”

She turns the boy’s head to Norman.

He is very pale. One of his eyes is not there at all. The other is very small, and it gleams, as if from a great distance. His mouth is red and crammed with uneven teeth. His legs and arms are shrunken, frail.

“The visitor’s name,” she whispers, “is....”

“Norman,” says Norman.

“Norman. Come closer, Norman.”

She looks at him.

“Surely you are not going to hesitate *now*, are you?”

Norman kneels beside them. May lifts one of Alexander’s small hands and rests it against Norman’s face. Alexander grunts. He squeaks.

“Yes,” murmurs May Malone. “Yes, I know, my

love.”

She smiles.

“Alexander thinks you are very beautiful,” she says.

Norman stares into the tiny distant eye. He searches for the boy’s distant consciousness.

“And isn’t *he* beautiful, too?” says May. “*Isn’t he?*”

“Yes, Miss Malone,” says Norman at last.

“Good. And Alexander says that you are like an angel. Now say hello. Go on. He can hear you, even though it might seem he can’t, just as he can see you.”

“Hello,” whispers Norman. “Hello, Alexander.”

Alexander squeaks.

“See?” says May. “He answers you. He is a boy, just like you. Can you see that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now sit beside him, Norman. Go on.”

Norman does this. Alexander leans against him.

“And he is getting older, just like you,” says May. “He needs a friend, just like you. And he needs to play.”

She sits on the edge of the bed, facing the two boys. She smooths her skirt over her knees and smiles.

“You’re lovely together,” she says.

Alexander suddenly turns his face upwards. There is a pigeon there looking down through the skylight. Alexander’s mouth purses and he coos.

“Yes!” says May. “A bird! And look at the clouds, Alexander.” He slowly, hesitantly, raises his hands and he opens them over his head. They flutter and tremble in the air.

“See?” says May Malone. “He knows that the world is beautiful, Norman.”

Alexander trembles, and Norman can feel the excitement rushing through the boy as the bird flutters its wings above.

“Now,” says May. “I would like you to take him out, Norman.”

Norman catches his breath. He glances at the door and gets ready to run.

“Please do not leave us,” says May Malone. “Not now.”

She takes his hand again.

“Just take him out into the yard at first,” she says. “What could be so difficult about that?”

“Who’s his father?” Norman dares to say.

“You *are* a nosey bugger, aren’t you?”

“Sorry, Miss Malone.”

“Are you a churchgoer?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Those black-gowned bloody priests. They blasted me. Don’t let them blast you, Norman, with their Thou shalt nots.” She touches her

boy's head. "They said this angel is a devil. Never mind his father. Will you take him out?"

They help Alexander to rise from the sofa. May Malone opens the door. Norman holds Alexander's arm and guides him out into the place where he's only ever hidden in the dark. It is late afternoon. The sun is descending in the west. There are great streaks of red and gold across the sky. A storm of starlings sweeps over them from north to south. The city rumbles, the river bell rings, the lads' voices echo from the green. Norman imagines walking towards them with May Malone's monster at his side. He imagines the lads turning to him in amazement. He imagines May Malone watching them all from a bench nearby. Alexander reaches upward, upward and he moans with joy. He leans against Norman and coos into his ear. May Malone watches from the doorway.

"See? It's easy enough, isn't it?" she says.

They soon go back inside. They take Alexander to his room and lay him down on the bed.

"He's tired out," said May. "But can you see how he is smiling, Norman?"

"Yes," says Norman, for he can. The distant gleam of Alexander's eye has grown brighter.

"He is as he is because he is as he is," says May.

"No other reason. And he is quite as capable of joy as any of us. More so, in fact."

She leans towards Norman.

"You, for instance," she says, "must stop being so sad. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Malone."

"Just open your eyes, Norman. The world is a strange and gorgeous and astonishing place."

She looks at her watch.

"Now," she says. "You will come back again, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss Malone."

"And you won't tell anybody, will you? Not until we're ready."

"No, Miss Malone."

"Good."

She kisses his cheek. He says goodbye to Alexander, and she leads him to the door.

"Good night," she says. "Until the next time. We will be waiting for you."

Norman walks up Crimea Terrace below the astonishing sky. He keeps touching his cheek where May Malone's lipstick is, where the memory of her lips is. He remembers the feeling of her red-fingernailed hand upon his. He keeps remembering Alexander's trembles of excitement.

A man is hurrying down the street, with the rim of his trilby tilted over his eyes.

“Hello,” says Norman.

The man flinches, looks at the boy in astonishment, then he gives a broad grin.

“Aye, aye, lad,” he says, and he winks.

Norman keeps going. All the sadness is lifting away from him as he goes uphill, like he’s opening up, like he’s beginning to see this world for the first time.

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David Almond's short stories have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies and illustrated books, and in two collections, *Sleepless Nights* and *A Kind of Heaven*.

His highly acclaimed children's novels include *Skellig*, winner of the Whitbread Children's Award and the Carnegie Medal; *Kit's Wilderness*, winner of the Smarties Award Silver Medal; and *The Fire-Eaters*, winner of the Whitbread Award and the Smarties Gold Award.