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Jungfrau (Winner)

Mary Watson

Caine Prize Stories 2006: Winner and Shortlist

IT WAS THE VIRGIN JESSICA who taught me about wickedness.

I once asked her why she was called the Virgin Jessica. She looked at me with strange eyes and said that it was because she was a special person, like the Blessed Mary.

"A virgin is someone who can do God's work. And if you're very, very clean and pure you can be one of the one hundred and forty-four virgins who will be carried in God's bosom at the end of the world. And if you're not –"

She leaned towards me, her yellow teeth before my eye. I thought she might suck it out, she was so close. She whispered, "If you're not, then God will toss you to the devil who will roast you with his horn. Like toasted marshmallows. You don't want the devil's evil horn to make a hole in your pretty skin, now do you?"

She kissed my nose – my little rabbit's nose, she called it – and walked away, her long white summer dress falling just above her high, high red heels. Her smell, cigarette smoke and last night's perfume, lingered around my eyeball. I wanted to be like the Virgin Jessica. I wanted a name like hers.

We called her Jez for short.

My mother Annette was the Virgin Jessica's adopted sister. She was older and tired. The Virgin had no children while my mother had forty-three. She was a schoolteacher in one of those schools where the children wore threadbare jerseys and had hard green snot crystallized around their noses and above their crusty lips – lips that could say poes without tasting any bitterness. Or that secret relish of forbidden language.

Sometimes my mother would have them – her other children, her little smelly children – over at our house. They would drape themselves around our furniture like dirty ornamental cherubs and drink hot pea soup. The steam melted the snot,

which then ran down into the soup. It did not matter to them because they ate their boogers anyway.

I hated my mother's other children. I glared at them to let them know, but they stared back without much expression. Their faces had nothing to say – I could read nothing there. Jessica found them amusing.

"Sweet little things," she mumbled, and laughed into her coffee. Her shoulders shook epileptically.

After the Virgin told me how important it was to be clean, I tolerated them in the haze of my superiority. I was clean – I bathed every night – and they were filthy, so obviously God wouldn't want to touch them.

The Virgin spent hours in the bathroom every evening. Naked she walked to her bedroom, so lovely and proud she seemed tall; I followed faithfully, to observe a ritual more awesome than church. With creams and powders she made herself even cleaner for God. How he must love her, I thought. She spread his love upon her as she rubbed her skin until it glowed and her smell spread through the house, covering us all with the strength of her devotion. Then she went out, just after my father came home, and stayed out until late.

The Virgin Jessica had a cloud of charm twenty centimetres around her body. Strangers hated her because they thought that anyone that beautiful could only be mean. But it was not her pretty black eyes or her mouth that made her beautiful. She was beautiful because she was wrapped in a cloud of charm. And when you breathed in the air from the cloud, you breathed in the charm and it went down your veins and into your heart and made you love her. If you came close enough, she would smile her skew smile, pretending to love you with her slitted eyes, and the charm would ooze out like fog from a sewer and grab you and sink into your heart and lungs. Even I who had known her all my life would feel the charm with a funny ache. She had a way of leaning forward when she spoke, claiming the space around her with her smell, her charm. And my father, who didn't speak or laugh, he too would be conquered.

"What's the old man up to tonight?" she would say, leaning towards him with a wink, her eyes laughing; and he would fold his newspaper and look pleased, even grunt contentedly.

I tried saying those same words, leaning forward the way Jez did, and he looked at me coldly. So cold that my wink froze halfway and my laugh caught in my throat. Embarrassed, I transformed the laugh into a cough and rubbed my eyes like a tired child. I think it was then that I realised that his love for me was bound to me as his little girl. And my love for him bound me to my little girl's world.

I took pains to keep my girl's world intact after that. When boys teased me at

school, I felt the walls of my father's favour tremble. One of them phoned and sang a dirty song into my hot ear. My head burnt for days after that. I felt the fires of hell from that phone call. I feared that the fires would start inside me, catching my hair and eating the strands like candlewick, melting my skin like wax, dripping and staining mommy's carpets (she would be very cross). The fire would eat the horrid children in the schoolroom, then crawl towards my mother, burn her slowly and then finish with her chalk-stained fingers. Her glasses would shrivel up and her mouth crease with silent screams. Unsatisfied, the fire would move towards my father, cracking his newspaper; the smoke would cloud his glasses. Beneath them, his eyes would have that same cold look – but not cold enough to douse the flames. The fire would then stagger towards the Virgin. Leering, it would grab her ankles and eat her white frock, turning it to soot. She would cry out and her head would toss, her hair unravel and she would scream from the force of the flames. The Virgin Jessica's screams in my head made me put a knife on the window-sill of her bedroom so that she could undo the burglar bars and escape.

The image of flames and screams resounded in my head for several days. They surged whenever the other girls in their shortened school dresses lit cigarettes in the toilets. They could not see how the flames would get bigger. I checked all the stubs carelessly tossed into the sink and bin to make sure that the fire did not escape. The slight thrill I had once received from the boys teasing me in the safety of the schoolyard, away from my father's fearsome eyes, faded. I spent my intervals at the far end of the yard, eating sandwiches and talking to the dogs through the wire fence. I had to coax them across the road with my milk and the ham from my bread. I was found one day, squatting on my haunches and telling Nina and Hildegarde about a garden of moss. I felt a shadow; it made me shiver, and I looked up to see if God was angry. Instead I saw Ms Collins above me, her eyes made huge by her glasses. I was scared that she'd be cross. I wanted to pee; some dripped down my leg, so I crouched and shut my eyes tightly, praying fervently that I would not pee. She reached out for my hand and asked me to make some charts for her in exchange for some biscuits and cool drink. From then on I spent my breaks helping Ms Collins in her art room and she would give me yoghurt and fruit and sometimes chocolate. I never ate these. Instead I put them on the steps of the white Kirk on the way home. Ms Collins tried to ask me questions, but I was shy and would only whisper, "I don't know." She would speak relentlessly. She told me about her baby daughter who ate grass.

I preferred just to look at her. I liked looking at her big ugly eyes and her pretty hair. But I think she got tired of me: maybe my silence wore her down, maybe the

sound of her own voice seared her, for it must have been like talking to herself. She probably thought she was going mad, talking and talking to still brown eyes. But the day I went into her art room and found a boy from my class helping her with the charts, I remembered the fires of hell and ran away. Maybe she wanted me to burn; maybe she wasn't a virgin either.

It must have been the sound of midnight that woke me. The house without my mother felt unguarded. It seemed her presence warded off a fury of demons. I sat upright in my clean girl's bed, trying to feel the pulse of the night. I slipped my feet over the side of the bed and listened. The darkness is covered by a haze that makes the still corners move.

I knew that my mother had not returned. The wild child with snot streaming from his nose and eyes, he had her still. I sat at the lounge window, watching the sea, hating the wild child. He had come after supper, his little body panting like a steam engine. He ran up the hill in the rain, he had run all the way from the settlement. He sobbed, buried his head in my mother's trousers.

"Please, please, *asssthiel*, please," his broken voice scratched. Wishing so very hard that he hadn't come, I watched the boy cry until my mother barked, "Evelyn, get out of here."

I prayed that the wild child would leave: go back to your plague, I screamed silently. It was too late. He had brought his plague with him. It wandered about our house and muffled my warnings. So she did not hear me, and let the child take her away.

Her trousers soiled with tears and mucus, she rushed into her bedroom, where I was watching one of those endless sitcoms about silly teenagers. She grabbed her car keys.

"Don't wait up for me."

I would not have waited for her. Even now, in the dark hour, I was not waiting for her.

I must have stayed at the window for at least an hour. I saw the sea roar-smash-roar against the rocks. I saw the stillness of the midnight road, the white line running on towards the mountain. The road was empty; but then I saw two people walking up the hill. They walked slowly and closely in their midnight world. The walk was a stagger.

They fell pleasantly against each other. I saw them walk towards the house and only then did I see who they were.

When Jessica and my father entered the house, quietly and with the guilty grace of burglars, they were glowing from the wind and walking and waves and the wildness of the night's beauty. The haze inherent in the darkness was centred

around them. I looked on with envy, for I too wished to walk the empty night with them. Jessica let out a startled sound when she saw me curled up on the window-sill.

"Look at you," she fussed, "hanging around dark windows like a sad little ghost."

Her face was close to mine and her breathing deep.

"Have you been watching for your mother? Has she come home yet?"

I shook my head. I had not been waiting for my mother.

She held my hands in her cold, cold fingers. "Your hands are freezing," she said.

"You need some Milo. How long have you been sitting here? Long?"

"Your father and I went to see if your mother was coming home. I wish she'd phone, but then they probably don't have one. I really don't understand why Annette involves herself in other people's business. But I suppose you should count your blessings. When we were small, Annette and me, all we had to play with was scrap metal."

Jessica chattered on, repeating the stories I had heard so many times.

My mother came home while I was clutching my Milo. I was playing the mournful ghost, the sick patient, and all the while glowing in the attention of both my father and Jessica. Jessica was chattering brightly, so bright that she made the darkness her own while I huddled in its shadows. My father was silent, his eyes as dark as mine. Jessica's words tripped out of her mouth and drew circles around us.

Then Annette stepped into our enchanted circle. She asked for tea. As Jessica made the tea her words stumbled then stopped. My father went to bed, taking my hand as he left the kitchen. I did not want to go to bed. I wanted to be in the kitchen with just my father and Jessica and me.

I stood on a rock in the garden and stared down at the people watching my sea. They were dotted across the small beach, the wind twisting their hair around their necks and forcing them closer into their jackets. They lifted their fingers to point, just like in a seaside painting.

Their mouths were wide with laughter and their eyes bright, yet all the while I knew that they were posing, as if for an invisible artist. Their minds could sometimes glimpse his black beret, his paint-splattered smock in this idyllic scene.

I went down to the sea. There were too many whale-watchers trampling the sand, my desecrated temple, with their flat feet and stubby toes. I glared at the children who clung to their parents, hanging on to their arms and legs.

"Beast with two backs," I muttered.

They smelt suburban. Their odour of white bread and Marmite drifted unpleasantly into the sea air. They huddled into their wind-breakers and yawned at the ocean.

"It's just a dark blob," they whined, their winter-paled faces cracking beneath the noon sun. They shivered from the wind nuzzling their necks.

I sat near the water's edge and buried my pretty toes in the sand. The crowd, the people who came to see the whales, were noisy and their noise ate into my ears as they crunched their chips and the packets cracked in the wind.

"Go home," I hissed to a solitary toddler who wandered near me.

I turned to see a woman scoop him up and pretend to eat his angel curls. My coward's face smiled at her.

I stayed there for a while, watching the people watch the whales. Then I noticed some of my mother's children playing in the water on the other side of the beach. They shrieked and laughed; some played in their dirty clothes, others in varying stages of nakedness.

They sang a ditty with filthy words while roughly showing and splashing each other with the cold water. They knocked down their friends and made them eat sand. The suburban children's parents shook their heads, pulled their young ones and walked away, still shaking their heads, as though the shaking would dispel the image from their minds. They soon forgot all about those children who haunted the corners of my world, my mother's chosen children.

She came to call me for lunch. She did not see her young ones, who had moved towards the tidal pool, and I did not tell her about them.

I sneaked my mother off the beach, chattering too brightly. We walked towards the hill. Someone came running behind us, but we carried on walking, for my mother didn't seem to hear the foot steps – maybe I was too bright. I walked faster and we crossed Main Road. When we reached the other side, I felt a light strong-hard knock like a spirit just made solid. I turned to see the wild child hugging my mother, her arms wrapped around him. He gave her a flower and ran back. When the wild child crossed the road, he was hit by whale people in a blue car. The driver got out, my mother ran to her child. The driver, annoyed and red, complained that he hadn't seen anyone, there was nobody there.

"Just a shadow flitted across my eyes," his wife wailed. "Just a dark shadow."

The driver said that he would fetch help. He and his wife drove off in their blue car – the dent was slight – and didn't come back. Perhaps to him there really was nobody there: the dent was so very slight, and those children are so thin, after all.

My mother lifted the wild child in her arms. She waited and while she waited,

her mouth got tighter and tighter and she wept. When one hundred blue cars had passed by, she slowly got up from the pavement. With the wild child in her arms, she walked up the hill. She did not speak to me, her mouth was tight and her hair unbound from its ponytail.

At our house Jessica and my father hovered awkwardly around her, their legs and arms looking wrong on their bodies, as if they had taken them off and put them back the wrong way. They moved slowly and clumsily, like they had wound down. My mother lay her child on my clean girl's bed and stayed by his side.

"Stephen, get the doctor quickly," she barked at my father.

I ate my Sunday roast. I paid little attention to the doctor's arrival or the child's crying or my mother's pacing. Her tight face had shut me out. I sat in the lounge and watched the sea, picking at the meat. When the violet hour came, the beach was empty and my room smelt of the wild child and the barest hint of my mother's love. But they were both gone.

I stayed in the lounge with my father and the Virgin, who brought us tea. We played cards and laughed the soft, covered laughs of forbidden frivolity. We munchled biscuits and watched the Virgin's teasing eyes as she tried to cheat, as she toasted marshmallows over a candle flame, as she spoke, smiled, sighed. The wild child and my mother were forgotten. I did not think of the bruised bundle on my bed.

Then the quiet beneath our laughter became too insistent. It was guilt that sent me in search of her. It was the guilt of the betrayer for the betrayed, because guilt is more binding than passion.

There was not a trace of my mother and the wild child in my bedroom. There was no mark of my mother's care or her chosen child's blood staining the sheets. There were no cup rings on my dressing table, no dent on the pillow. I looked for my mother in my bedroom. I hunted in every corner but could not find the slightest whisper of her smell.

I could find nothing of her in the lounge – that was my father's room. Their bedroom was green and clinical and did not contain either of them. The kitchen was heavy with the Virgin's presence, which smelt of rose water with a burry undertone. I sat down on the floor, perplexed.

Agitated, I realised that I could not remember if her smell had been in the house the day before. Or the previous week. I went to the garage, which she used as a schoolroom. As I opened the door, a fury of smells came screaming towards me. There were the wild children's smells of pain and fear and anger. And she was there, entangled in this foul mix. Nothing of her remained in the house because it was all concentrated here. Delicately it cushioned and enveloped the rawness of

the children as it wove itself into them. The force of this beauty, this tenderness made me want to weep with jealousy. Such sadness, such terror. I left the dim garage knowing that my mother had been gone for a long time. I had not noticed because I had been coveting the Virgin. I went back to the house.

Jessica tilted her head slightly and focused her skew eyes on me. I had not seen her standing in the doorway, slim and graceful (she was so beautiful), watching me.

"What are you sniffing around for? Does something smell bad?" She seemed anxious.

"Not in here," I replied. "I was just smelling. Smelling to see where my mother has gone."

"You funny, funny child," she said, wrapping her precious arms around me. I pretended to squirm. "What else can that incredible snout of yours sniff out? Can you smell where your father is?"

I was surprised, because she didn't understand me at all. I looked at her and saw an odd dullness in her pretty face.

"It doesn't happen with my nose," I tried to explain. "It happens inside somewhere, same as when Daddy and I go to the moss garden. I don't see it with my eyes."

She regarded me with a slight frown shadowing her eyes and making her face sulky.

"What moss garden?"

"Secrets."

I smiled sweetly at her and she lost her frown and said, "Don't you trouble your pretty little head about your inner eyes and ears, you are much too young for such worries."

She coaxed me into helping her make sandwiches, which was easy because I loved doing anything with her. But she still did not know what I meant.

I sought out my mother after that. I lavished attention upon her, for I felt that I had betrayed her. I betrayed her with my unholy, selfish love for the Virgin. I placated her with tokens of love, with tea and wild flowers picked along the road to the beach. I feared that the Blessed Mary would not be pleased that in my heart of hearts I had turned my love from my flesh mother to another. My guilt was augmented by my jealousy of her chosen children, and because I denied her my love yet begrudged her theirs. As my guilt grew so her nocturnal visits to the township increased.

"There's so much fear out there, you couldn't imagine it, Evie. You're a lucky, lucky girl. I remember being so poor that my hunger nearly drove me insane. We

were like wild flowers growing on the side of the road."

I resented my mother's childhood poverty. I resented her hunger and I resented being made to feel guilty about not being hungry.

"You could so easily have been one of those children, look at Auntie Carmelita, the way her children run around, that's the inmates ruling the asylum. So you just be grateful that you're not like them. You think about that if it makes you sad when I go out at night."

It did not make me sad when she went out at night. I was jealous but not sad, because her absence set my nights free. I would stare at the midnight sea; I would walk the moss garden with my father.

I sought her greedily with endless cups of tea and awkwardly asked her how her day had been - did she not think the weather was fine for this time of year? - smoothed her hair, kissed her cheek with my Judas lips and fussed about her as much as Jessica did.

And she would be propped in her chair, my mother, my failed heroine, and I would talk and talk and she would say, "Not now, Evie, I'm tired, tired," and my guilt would grow and I would leave unhappy yet relieved. Her eyes would hold mine and she would say, "Thanks Evie," and the guilt grew and grew because there was trust and affection in her eyes, doggy brown eyes that I did not want to love.

Those eyes changed one day and she became cross. Her breath was thin and tinny, like she did not want to take air in, let air out. Theedium of breathing seemed to offend her so she resisted it. That was when she started smoking cigarettes. She took some of Jessica's cigarettes, shrugged like Jessica and laughed.

"Makes breathing interesting," she tittered. "Besides, we're all going to die anyway," she cackled, looking at the danger signs on the box. She laughed and laughed but it was a cross laugh.

It crept out of the silences, was born between a glance held, then turned away. This guilt would not be contained. It was in the air as plain as the tingling cold of sunny winter days. It kept me awake those cold August nights. So cold that my fingers would ache as I lay awake, feeling the ice in the walls, the breathing of the house, the numbness of my mother's nocturnal absences. I sighed and turned the other cheek, hoping to find sleep with my back to the wall, then my face, then my back again.

There is no rest for the wicked.

"Be a good girl," my father had said as he kissed me that night. "Be a good girl for your old father."

He kissed me again and pulled the covers up to my chin. When he got up from

the bed, the mattress rose as the weight lifted. I felt safe then, as the rain and wind struck down on the roof.

It was still raining as I lay staring at the ceiling in the small hours of the morning.

There is no rest for the wicked.

Sighing an old woman's sigh, I kicked my tired sore legs to the right, the side where I always raised myself from the bed. I wandered to the kitchen seeking leftovers from the Virgin's dinner, because I was famished. Trying to be the good child exhausted me and then left me sleepless. I could hear my father snoring. He sounded like a wailing wolf. I was surprised that he slept. When I wandered around the rooms at night, I felt the alertness of a house that did not slumber nor sleep.

I found the Virgin in her kitchen. She was eating. She struck her fork into the mince and rammed it into her mouth. Again and again she stuffed forkfuls into her mouth, sometimes pausing to mix the mince with spaghetti, her delicate fingers wittily swirling it around the fork. The apple-pie dish lay empty before her.

When she looked up and saw me, spaghetti was hanging down the side of her mouth, from those sweet red lips. She let go of the fork. She seemed embarrassed, but she had no need to be because I knew that she had been fasting. The Virgin often fasted to deny herself the pleasures of the flesh. I admired her for that because I could not fast no matter how hard I tried. But looking at her with spaghetti on her chin and mince on her white nightgown, I felt ill. Surely she would make herself sick, eating like that. She looked up and saw me, and it frightened me because she looked old. The guilt had etched itself there too. I was frightened because I thought that the Virgin was pure. I chased those naughty thoughts from my mind. I chased them until my beloved Virgin seemed young again. Then unbidden, the words came to my mouth.

"There's no rest for the wicked," I said.

My words hurt her; she placed her head in her hands. The guilt was what made me do it, the guilt, it made words come to my mouth. My secret joy at releasing suppressed words sank into my flesh and I felt my skin tauten. My hands were wet so I wiped my mouth, but it would not be clean. When she left the room, my mind screamed for her mercy, for forgiveness. She did not hear me; she took none of that with her. I sat in her chair and waited and waited.

I longed for my mother then. I longed to press my burning face, my wet nose into her trousers and sob. I wanted her to leave her bed at night and come to me and to choose me as her child and I would choose her as my mother and the guilt would go away and we would be happy. I went to where I knew I would find some of her.

The schoolroom door creaked slightly and my white slippers upon the cold cement floor made a featherlight crunch. I stood in the dark waiting to feel her and the children, waiting for sounds that were long gone. I crossed my arms around myself and waited. And then they came to me – the sighs, the hushed tinkles of laughter, the moans and the whimpers. The room was drenched in sorrow. I listened excitedly as the ghosts of yesterday came to me. The sounds grew less and less faint. They were calling to me. The shadows started taking shape and I saw that everything had fallen into a woven mass, a moving tapestry in the corner of the schoolroom. I saw my mother as a she-wolf, her hair tangled and glowing, licking her young ones, her tongue moving over furry flesh. I wanted to join her pack and have her lick my sins away. I moved towards them, then stopped, for the shadows changed again. My mother now had Jessica's face, an unfamiliar Jessica face with enormous slanted glowing eyes, feral biting teeth that dipped to the whimpering flesh beneath her. My mother was gone.

"Mommy?" I whispered. "Mommy?" It was shrill and anxious. I did not know what magic I had conjured.

"Mommy?"

Everything stopped moving. The tapestry froze and then unraveled.

And then I saw them. I had not imagined the moving tapestry in the corner of the schoolroom, nor had I imagined Jessica licking the furry flesh. As my eyes accustomed themselves to the dim light, I saw that it was my father with Jessica. They were clumsily covering their bodies, hiding themselves, and I thought that was silly – I had seen it all before. But I had not known that he shared the moss garden with her. I left the garage. I heard them calling after me and I walked away.

Mary Watson was born in Cape Town, South Africa. Her collection of interlinking stories, *Moss* (Kwela 2004), explores themes of innocence, human cruelty, loss and belonging, distorted through the prism of apartheid Cape Town. Watson is currently lecturing Film Studies at the University of Cape Town where she received a Meritorious Publication award for *Moss*. She completed her Master's degree in Creative Writing under the mentorship of Andre Brink in 2001, and studied Film and TV production at Bristol University in 2003. Her film, writing and research interests all arise from an obsession with stories and with alternative ways in which reality can be represented through art. She has contributed several short stories to published anthologies (including in translation in Afrikaans and German). She is currently working on her first novel and on a collaborative novel together with a group of other South African authors.