

# MONSTER LOVE

'A chilling love story  
with a twist as compelling  
as it is disturbing' *Elle*

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Monster Love  
by  
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## *Charlotte*

The baby was a dear little thing. Sherilyn had an extraordinary pram cum buggy for her – I'd never seen anything like it. It was state of the art, all aerodynamic lines and huge plastic wheels and so silent they'd be on you before you realised they were there. It was dreadfully distracting – you were so busy admiring this expensive carriage, you had to remind yourself there was a real live baby in it. Mind you, she was so quiet and still she could have been make-believe, like the dolls they give little children in nativity plays in case they drop baby Jesus. I'd never subscribed to any religion, but after they found her I had this niggly question batting around in my mind: would it have made it any easier if I'd had a faith to cling on to? If I'd believed in all that nonsense, would the idea of a credible evil have helped? I didn't think so. I'd always rather prided myself on never having slid into religious faith as insurance as I got older, so I wasn't about to become a docile penitent, even in the face of this appalling tragedy.

Samantha was always beautifully dressed. Everything matched: coat, hat, frock, gloves, and if she was wearing lilac, the pram cover would be dark lilac, if pink, then lighter pink and so on. The planning that went into that made the Iron Lady look chaotic. One might have expected Sherilyn to be in another shade of the same colour, like a mummy 'n' baby matching set, but she was determinedly different, as though she'd divested herself of any association with her daughter. She often wore black in the early months: immaculate, tailored, designer black, as though she were just on the way to her important job. Or in mourning. I'm reasonably fastidious about the way I look, but

she made me feel like a bag lady sometimes. I do try to make time for going to the hairdresser's and shopping around for smart clothes, but there are other priorities, like the gardening, so I keep my nails short and practical. Hers were like talons – put me in mind of those mandarins who never cut theirs so everyone would know they were too damn important to have to do manual work – and I wondered how she managed all those tender maternal tasks with her nails that long.

I try not to be too judgemental – Lord knows, a career teaching in inner-city schools exposed me to wildly different lifestyles and cultures – but something didn't fit. You can see a woman with her child and she may be wholly uneducated, but she knows how to mother. She knows how to respond to her child, how to read her child, how to gratify or deny her child but it was as if Sherilyn were playing a role in someone else's life story. She'd be clacking down the street in those vertiginously high heels she wore, and you'd stop her and say How's Samantha? And she'd smile tightly and say Oh, she's sleeping through the night now, she's such a good baby. Or, She's started eating solids – it's such a relief not to have to sterilise all those bottles. But it was as if she were talking about someone she knew nothing about, regurgitating something she'd come across in a book without having digested its meaning.

And I never saw her touching the baby. Not once. She'd tweak her bedclothes or raise the hood of the baby mobile when it started to rain, but she never stroked her face or patted her curls or made any of those busy loving gestures you see in new mums. Samantha was always stoppered, and when her dummy fell out Sherilyn would stick it straight back in then pull out a tissue to wipe her own fingers. Once the baby had a cold and was pouring mucus from her nose. When Sherilyn noticed, she gave an involuntary grimace. I said Poor little sausage and wiped her nose with one of my own tissues. Sherilyn's sharp little face

cracked just for an instant and she shot me a look of such gratitude I felt slightly breathless. But I couldn't capitalise on it. With anyone else, I'd have said Come in for a coffee, you look like you could do with a sit, but her face closed down immediately. It was like when you're looking at one of those lowering skies pregnant with rain and there's a sudden split in the clouds – you get a momentary glimpse of some other weather beyond, then it snaps back again. You have to insist that it really happened because it's become incredible.

She must have got pregnant shortly after they moved in and because her frame was so delicate you could pretty much tell straight away. I'd see them going off to work together in their fancy BMW and while she'd obviously had to buy new clothes to accommodate her growing baby, the bump always looked as though it were strapped on to her like an added extra. As though it really wasn't part of her at all. As though her body absolved itself of any responsibility for it.

I was sad when the Bennetts moved out because Lamorna was a good friend, but I thought the Gutteridges would enhance life in the Crescent; they looked as though they'd got life sorted. They painted the outside of their house as soon as they moved in, and had the front and back gardens done by professional gardeners. It was all a bit formal for my taste – I like plants to roam around and ramble into each other – but each to his own. Like the way Sherilyn dressed, it was precisely colour-coordinated. No room for any happy accident. I have a much admired camellia in my back garden – the soil's limey, so my rhodies and azaleas are pretty spectacular too – and I offered them a cutting. How very kind, they said, How thoughtful, but no thank you. We decided against red in our garden. They were frightfully well mannered, always. I'm in favour of that. Rather swam against the tide at school by insisting that the kids please'd and thank you'd alongside learning the fundamentals of

grammar. I was much derided. But their manners were too good, as though they weren't there to demonstrate concern for the other person, but to repulse contact. I try not to be wise with hindsight, but Annie from number 17 remembers me saying that when I'd spoken to one or other of them, I felt like I'd been talking to an iceberg. Very beautiful, very frozen and very hidden. Very lethal, I might say now.

But you can't be close friends with everybody and they were never rude. When my husband, Russell, died unexpectedly five years ago, there was a tremendous rallying round. My daughter, Olivia, had already gone off to Australia with Stefan, but she jumped on a plane straight away. Even Marcus, my son, came over from Denmark for his dad's funeral. We'd rather lost touch with him since he'd emptied one of our bank accounts, but the Danish police tracked him down and he turned up at the crematorium in his robes. I was glad he'd found some roots, even if it was with the cult. Being adopted, he was probably always looking for a way of belonging.

All my friends in the Crescent popped in and out with food and flowers and the cards arrived in droves. All Russell's and my colleagues sent condolences, and the jungle drums boomed around both our families. Cousins and second cousins I'd almost forgotten I had got in touch, so for a short while I was positively swaddled with love. One might have thought the Gutteridges would have noticed the comings and goings and have asked one of the neighbours what was going on, but they didn't. And I'd welcomed them to the road with a little basket of goodies when they arrived: crab-apple jelly from my tree, the burdock wine Russell used to make, and a big bunch of flowers from the garden. I suspect there were too many colours in the bunch for them. But they didn't send a card or stand at the kerb's edge like the other neighbours when the hearse left. Maureen from

number 24 pointed it out. I hadn't noticed, but then grief temporarily blinds you.

A lot of the support dropped away after a few weeks. It wasn't that people stopped caring, more that you're supposed to have got over it a couple of months down the line. Actually, it's then that it really starts hitting home that you're on your own. That there's twenty, thirty years to go without your life's companion. I was quite low and was already debating whether to carry on teaching, so when Olivia called me in the middle of the night to say she was pregnant, that settled it. I handed in my resignation. I didn't need the money – Russell's life insurance was very generous and thirty years' teaching produced a reasonable pension – so I got into training for grannyhood. Shortly afterwards I noticed Sherilyn's strap-on bump and while Olivia was assiduous about keeping me up to speed about her pregnancy, I couldn't just pop round and see, so I might have been slightly overkeen on following my neighbour's progress. I remember passing her in the street once and saying How's it going? And she said What? as though I'd asked her about the presidential election in Guatemala or the millet harvest in Moldavia. Your pregnancy, I said, My daughter's pregnant but she's in Australia so I'm going to be spending a lot of time on planes. But I'm delighted, I said, Bet your mum is too. There was a slight pause and then she said Oh yes, she likes babies and then she said Sorry, I'm in a bit of a rush to meet friends, and that was the end of that.

I didn't think I was nosy, I was just interested in people. When my neighbours were away and I looked after their cats and plants, I tried to put on metaphorical blinkers as I went round the house. Frank and Amelia's fluorescent condoms on the bedside table made me smile though: he was such a formal man and she could barely cross the road on her own. I noticed hooks in their bedroom ceiling too. Once I'd given up work, I kept an eye on

things in the Crescent just as a matter of neighbourliness. When the Blewitts at number 12 started building a raised terrace all round their house, I said to Jenny at number 10 that she should speak to her solicitor because it meant they'd overlook her patio. He wrote them a letter, so they altered their plans and built a very pretty wall in between. It was all very amicable and Jenny gave me a lovely urn to say thank you.

There wasn't a lot of crime in Tamley – last burglary was about seven years ago, Alice and Thomas at number 3 – but nonetheless it was wise to be alert. The Gutteridges installed a Banham alarm system shortly after they moved in, which surprised me because we'd none of us gone in for that sort of thing, but they were new to the area, from London, so I thought maybe they felt more vulnerable than us. They may have cost a fortune, those modern houses, but they were nothing like as sturdy as the older ones in the rest of the Crescent; the Victorians were empire builders, after all. Their house looked pretty impregnable – I noticed they'd fitted locks on their windows, top and bottom, and bars on the front and back doors. You can see their back door from Jessie and Tim's patio, at number 11. They'd made it impossible to get in there, I thought. And it was much the same with them. Nothing was going in and nothing was coming out. Brendan was perfectly amiable when you met him on the street, but it was nearly a year before I discovered what he did for a living.

When they moved in, I said to them Any time you're away, just give me a bell and I'll pop over and feed the cat – they had this exquisite long-haired cat with blue eyes. I never did find out what it was called. And they said Thank you, how kind. We will. But they never did, though before she had the baby I saw them shut the house up from time to time for the weekend, so they obviously did go away. They didn't seem to need anything from anyone else and to some degree I found that self-sufficiency quite

envious: that delicious sense of being utterly wrapped up in another person. Russell and I were like that before we had Marcus, but after you've had children your mind necessarily divides itself between all the people in your life and that bubble of intimacy pops.

My friends often say Oh Charlotte, you're always giving, giving, giving, do let us give something back to you, but I find it hard to ask, and anyway I find it much more satisfying being useful to other people. But when I went to Canberra after Amy's birth, I had to ask for help, and Amelia and Maureen took care of my indoor plants and my garden between them. My calla lilies weren't very well when I came back, but they did their best.

I fell in love with Amy at first sight. I cried when Olivia handed her to me because she reminded me of Marcus when first we got him. That's idiotic of course, because we didn't actually conceive him, but it made me think of how long we'd waited and how desperately we'd loved him so I wrote to him from Australia telling him again how precious a gift he'd been. He didn't reply. Olivia had had a difficult delivery and was struggling to breastfeed the baby, but she said I must have brought serenity with me in my coat pockets because she and Amy settled soon after I arrived.

It was such a wrench leaving them; it was almost as though my womb had been filled again and was suddenly evacuated when I got on the plane. That's a little fanciful, but I'm sure that's why I kept my eye on Sherilyn's pregnancy and their baby, who was born seven weeks after I got back from Australia. I popped a card through their letterbox when I heard and left a potted plant on their step, because they weren't answering the door. I didn't see her or the baby for nearly three months after she was born, although I saw Brendan going off to work and coming back as usual. Then I started seeing him coming back during the day and picking her and the baby up. She was smartly

dressed in suits, as though she were going off to a business meeting; he carried the baby to the car like a bag of shopping. I never saw her face.

I had rather to push Sherilyn for her name when I started seeing them occasionally in the street. She referred to her as 'the baby' when I asked after her, and even when I established that she was called Samantha, she didn't use her name and looked slightly discomfited when I did. I showed her the pictures of Amy I kept in my bag – I'd become a shameless granny-bore – and she looked at them politely for a moment as though she were looking at someone's new roof, changed the subject to something neutral and took herself off. I wondered if she had a touch of the baby blues, but any gentle enquiry just pinged off her carapace, so I had to hope that her mum was around.

I'd see the three of them out together sometimes when Samantha was a toddler. I was going over to Australia every two or three months by then and Amy knew who I was. She called me Nannie-Lottie, and Olivia and Stefan took the opportunity to go away for long weekends while I was there, so I had plenty of granny-time with her. She and I used to potter around the garden together and sometimes she'd help me plant things; she was passionate about ladybirds, which she called 'babylirds'. But I never saw Samantha walking, even when she was of the age. Rain or shine she was always strapped into the buggy.

I know I'm partial, but Amy's language was very well developed by then so I used to squat down to chat to Samantha when we met in the street. She was a solemn little thing and nothing I said evoked a cheery response: it was quite eerie. When she was that sort of age, everybody used to say Olivia charmed the birds from the trees, though they found Marcus harder to know. I'd say to her Hi Sammy, are you going to the shops with Mummy and Daddy? What are you going to buy? And she'd look at me and say We buying food for pussy cat 'cause he hungry.

And I'd say How lovely, lucky pussy, and how about you? Maybe Mummy and Daddy will buy you an ice cream, what do you think? And she'd look very serious and say I do be good girl, I be very very good girl. Not bad girl. I remember Brendan saying We try to be careful with her sugar intake, actually. It's so bad for her teeth. I knew he was being responsible, but I thought Oh give her a treat for heaven's sake, it won't kill her.

Then she dropped off the map. I'd seen her out of the house only rarely anyway, so it took a while for it to sink in that I hadn't laid eyes on her for six months or so. I asked Jessie and Tim if they'd seen her playing in the back garden and they said they hadn't, but sometimes they heard her crying and Brendan's voice shouting in what was obviously her bedroom. That was strange, because she'd always seemed like such a well-behaved child from babyhood on. Unnervingly well behaved I might have said, for such a little one. Some time later, I asked them again and Jessie said she hadn't heard Samantha crying for a while, but she and Tim were having a marital blip just then so they were probably preoccupied. Turns out Jessie had been having an affair with a woman at work for some months.

When the two of them went away to the West Indies for a reconciliation holiday, I said I'd look after their house for them. They were very grateful. We know it'll be in safe hands, Tim said, Wish us luck, Charlotte. The master bedroom was in the back in those houses, and theirs was pink and floral. Poor old Tim, I thought, because it was rather assertively girly-girly. When I looked down from there at the Gutterridges' garden, I was quite taken aback because I hadn't seen it from above before. The big house that had been on that site had had a lovely garden, huge and rambling, but it had been dug up when they demolished the house to make way for those five new ones. It was about nine years ago and I remember saying to Russell at the time that I hoped the new houses fitted in. They didn't, but there wasn't a

lot we could do about it. Each household inscribed their own horticultural signature on the land, and four of them: the Pinkers (they're gone now – off to Egypt with her job), the Bulls, the Smedleys and Jessie and Tim went in for quite traditional gardens, though the Pinkers added a conservatory in which they grew a not very successful grapevine. The Bennetts went in for a lot of lawn. But the Gutteridges had had this formal garden made, with geometric shapes edged with box, and different-coloured gravel and paving. It had probably cost a fortune, but had all the organic energy of a plastic box. It was ridiculously grandiose too – this was Tamley, for heaven's sake, not Blenheim – and there was no room for any plant to do its own thing. It was a well-mannered garden, like them: very ordered, very correct and very unyielding.

Most days I sat on the pink window seat in Jessie and Tim's bedroom, just observing. I wasn't prying but I was intrigued by this polite garden and wondered how they used it. It wasn't the kind of garden a little girl could kick a ball around, or turn somersaults in, but then I never saw Samantha out there that whole fortnight. Sometimes one goes into a house or sees one in a magazine and it's clear straight away that there aren't any children living there; that's how this garden looked. No nooks and crannies for hide and seek, nowhere for a sandpit or a paddling pool – no room for any of the ordinary messes that children make. It made me rather sad. Russell was forever saying things like Oh, what's a broken standard rose between friends? Marcus is turning into a fine batsman. Forget it, Char! And he was right, though losing my beloved Princess Alexandra was a bit galling.

I'd see the two of them out there though – it was a balmy late August, as I recall – and they'd sit and chat on their patio every evening, Brendan in his shirtsleeves and Sherilyn in some tight little wisp of silk. She'd have brought out a bottle of wine in a chiller, two or three sorts of nibbles in matching bowls, he'd

uncork the bottle – it often seemed to be sparkling, champagne for all I know – and they'd settle in like a pair of bookends. They were never lost for words, unlike some couples you see who make you wonder quite why they ever got together: these two were like yin and yang. It contrasted so strangely with how they were when you came across them in the street: in private there was a fluency between them and a playful good humour that was very attractive. I realised afterwards that I'd never seen either of them laugh before, not in that hearty throw back your head way. You'd get a pinched little smile when you made a joke, but you knew they were simply applying the proper formula: joke + response = smile. But on that patio, night after night, they laughed and chuckled and giggled and chortled; they seemed to find each other endlessly entertaining. Despite the fact that they looked such a mismatched pair, he with his burly rigger-bugger frame and she with her porcelain-doll fragility, there was such a rapport between them, they could have been a pair of ivies winding around each other in happy symbiosis.

One evening when she brought out the drinks, she had a red stethoscope around her neck. Brendan looked utterly delighted and clapped his hands. She put the tray down on the table and went over to sit on his lap. She must have been whispering something in his ear, because his head was cocked towards her. A few minutes later they got up, went inside, and didn't come back for an hour or so. I thought maybe they'd gone to make Samantha her tea, maybe bath her and bring her outside to sit with them in her pyjamas, but she didn't appear.

Tim and Jessie had told me which room was hers and I'd sit in the equivalent room in their house at various times of the day, listening and watching. By that stage I was a little worried. I value the way the English respect privacy and I'm chary of intruding on anyone, but I suppose I was probably more sensitive than usual because of Amy. And Marcus had just written the

week before saying his wife had had a baby. I didn't even know he was married, let alone that she was pregnant.

I'd sit there early in the morning thinking I'd hear them getting her up for breakfast, but there was nothing. Then lunchtime: nothing. Sherilyn went out shopping: nothing. Bathtime: nothing. The curtains on the window opposite stayed resolutely shut like a pair of blind eyes. I saw Sherilyn in the back garden one afternoon when I was watering the lawn and I said Just looking after the house for Tim and Jessie while they're away. Caribbean, lucky so-and-sos. She said Oh you're such a good neighbour and I said Do the same for you any time, how's Samantha? Without a blink she said Gone to play with my friend's little girl. Frannie, she said, They're bosom buddies the two of them. I said Terribly important to have friends, isn't it, especially if you're an only child. I've got a pond in my garden, I said, With goldfish and frogs. Would the little girls like to come round and see them? They could help me with the feeding. She said That's very kind of you. Thank you. We'll knock on your door sometime. Which house is it? The one with the mature acer in the garden, I said, Rather dishevelled wisteria up the front. Thank you, she said, We'll definitely be round. I thought I probably wouldn't hold my breath.

I've kicked myself that I didn't do anything about it then. I've often thought, What if I had? Would she have been alive now? What if I'd broken the usual protocols of letting people be? Sleeping dogs lie. Dead children rot. But the bald fact is I didn't.

Soon after talking to Sherilyn in the garden I suddenly became very busy because Marcus's wife developed a potentially fatal infection and he asked me to go to Denmark to help. It meant that he wanted me in his life again, so I dropped everything and ran. She jolly nearly died, so it was a good thing I went because it was my insistence that they took her to a conventional doctor that saved her life. They seemed to think that chanting and

seaweed were going to do it. I had to keep telling myself that everyone had a right to their own beliefs, but I was spitting teeth – how *dare* they risk my grandson growing up motherless for the sake of some cockeyed God-bothering mumbo-jumbo!

By the time I'd trekked to Denmark and back a few times, and taken quite a long break in Australia – Amy'd just started nursery and Olivia went back to university to research a doctorate – it must have been nine months or so before I finally decided to do something about Samantha's disappearance. One of my colleagues at school, rather an odd woman who taught sociology, had her children taken into care when it became clear she was a serious drug user, so I was well aware that neglect goes on among the middle classes as much as on council estates. But truthfully I had been dithering. All their excuses were plausible enough: Samantha was asleep/ill/staying with her grandparents/her cousins, but despite her busy social life, you'd expect to see her occasionally.

I wasn't ashamed of what I was doing, so I gave the NSPCC my name and phone number when I called to alert them. Probably nothing I said, But you just want to be sure, don't you? The woman agreed. I wasn't simple-minded about authorities – Lord knows, I was a figure of authority myself for years – but I was happy to hand over responsibility to a specialist organisation. I didn't tell anyone in the Crescent what I'd done. If it was nothing, I didn't want to poison anyone's mind against the Gutteridges; they had to carry on living among us after all. I told Olivia though, and she thought I'd done the right thing. Someone from Social Services called me a few days later and said they'd be following it up. She said I'd done the right thing too.

Once I'd reported them, it was as though I could let my imagination run off the leash and I was quite plagued by bleak imaginings. Mostly I imagined Samantha ill or even injured by her father, because Jessie had said his shouting sounded quite

hysterical, but I never imagined the cage. Rationally, you know human beings do unconscionable things to each other, but you never think, Here. Next door. In my street. That's what people always say, but people always say it because it's true.

I asked the social worker if they'd let me know the upshot of their investigation, but she said no, and while I knew that was right I did feel a little frustrated. I didn't think about what had happened to Samantha every day, but it was obviously simmering away on the back burner because she came into my dreams. She was always dead in my dreams. That probably upped the ante, so when their burglar alarm started going off I called Tim. He said he'd seen them going off with quantities of luggage some time before – just the two of them – so I called the police. No emergency, I said, But I'd be grateful if you'd come and check the house.

I saw the patrol car arrive and the two police officers get out, so I walked over and spoke to the man. He had a sweet, open, podgy face and said Not to worry, madam, we'll just have a look around. Leave it with us. We'll let you know if there's anything untoward – you just pop on home. I did, but I kept my eyes on the house, so I saw all the other police cars and the ambulances turn up a bit later. They brought out the policeman first. He seemed to have shrunk. He was a rotund man, but he looked like one of those inflatable clown punchbags whose plug had been pulled. He had to be helped into the ambulance by two paramedics.

The police cars had different letters on their roofs, and men in disposable overalls swarmed out of the vans and into the house. They brought her out in a white box. Not a coffin, just a box you might keep odds and ends in. Her remains. Like leftovers on a plate. Detritus littering the ground after a picnic. I prefer 'body'. Dead body. Murdered little girl. Daughter. I wanted to rub my own nose in it, so I imagined being Brendan or Sherilyn.

Imagined what it must feel like to so hate your child you'd want to put her in a cage and leave her to die. Though perhaps hate didn't come into it. They didn't seem hateful towards her when I met them on the street, just indifferent.

Even having that idea in my head made it ache, so I tried to shut down the thoughts, but they were compulsive. I had an almost continuous sub-migraine for weeks. When the police interviewed me, I dosed myself up with so many painkillers I must have come across as a bit of a zombie. But a zombie doesn't feel anything and I was feeling too much. So when they asked me What did you see? and I said Nothing. What did you hear? Nothing. What did you do? and I said Nothing again, I burst into tears. It was in that Nothing, that black hole of Nothing, that Samantha had disappeared.

You couldn't move for the press. They descended almost immediately, like a swarm of unholy locusts frantically gobbling up anything in their path. I became pretty housebound for a short while because they'd pounce on you as soon as you showed your face at the door, but you weren't even safe inside because they'd stuff notes through the letterbox offering sums of money for an interview. Quite large sums, and I could imagine the temptation for someone less comfortably off than me. I thought Maureen had succumbed, though she denied it. She was anonymously quoted in one of the newspaper features, but she'd just lost her part-time job, so she might have taken the blood money. I tried not to blame her.

Then I thought, Buck up, Charlotte, you were Head of Department for heaven's sake and these people are just maggots doing their maggoty job, so I tried to resume my normal life. And I did to a large extent, though in some ways nothing was ever normal again. I went to the shops two weeks later, but it felt different because I was going to the shops having experienced this. This was never *not* going to have happened. This outrageous piece of

history lodged in my present and future like a piece of shrapnel in my flesh and so skewed things that I couldn't look at parents with their children and not wonder, fleetingly, what was going on behind their front door. Wonder if those pretty trousers were hiding dynasties of bruises. If the child's jolly smile was hiding terrible anguish.

When the press interest died down, life in the Crescent resumed, but it walked with a limp. I'd begun drinking a little without noticing it: it started off with a second sherry here and there and then I found myself consuming a whole bottle of wine with my dinner most nights. I was quite ashamed of myself, but not enough to stop. In a weird way, it linked me back to Russell, which was comforting. He drank far too much.

But while the first dramatic stages were over I knew it would all crank up again when the Gutteridges came to trial, so I arranged to go to Denmark. I thought the Danish press would be less interested in it than the Aussie vultures, but Denmark was having one of its periodic Lutheran lurches and so it was all over the national media. The decadent heart of the uptight Brits, that sort of thing. Strangely, the Robed Chosen Ones devoured it too. They had one wonky television in a tiny anteroom and they all piled in night after night watching the reports, so there was no escape. Marcus acquired a kind of notoriety by association with me, so he didn't stop his fellow cult members banging on about what had happened, tacitly accusing me of culpability in Samantha's death. He needed to feel special, and this was one – albeit perverse – way of being centre stage.

I couldn't bear the sanctimony, so I left. I rented a tiny house on a practically uninhabited Danish island and wrote terrible poetry. It was odd to be so isolated, but in that contemplative mood I learned something about my almost imperative need to know everything about everyone, which truthfully does bleed into nosiness. I might once have called it community spirit.

*Monster Love*

Now I'm back at home and trying to take things slowly. I considered training for Childline and went to a couple of preliminary meetings, but I recognised early enough that I wanted to do it as expiation, which was quite the wrong motivation, so I withdrew. I've put the house on the market and I'm conducting an archaeological dig through the twenty years of living here before I ship myself over to Australia. If I choose to work again there are apparently plenty of jobs going teaching Aboriginal children, but I may not apply. Life has acquired a terrible sense of brevity, and I want to be around to teach Amy to play cricket in the garden.