

Valeria Parrella

The hawks' lair

'I can't see how you can like it. And it's not just because you're a girl and these are boys' toys, you know. You've got boys' tastes but I've never made a big thing out of it... it's just that this time it seems horrible. I can't see how you can like it' .

Irene walked quickly to keep up with her mother.

As it turned out, the request had taken a less roundabout route and had required less nerve than usual, less insistence than usual to get it.

She'd seen it the day before in the corridor, in front of class five. The boy was crying and crushing one in his right hand.

The pressure of his hand completely deformed it and a sticky fluorescent liquid oozed out. It was fantastic.

'Don't cry – Irene had tried - you've got this beautiful monster...'

At lunch she had described the scene to her mother who had found both generous and instructive her daughter's way of trying to show the boy the positive side of the situation.

Irene had not been thinking about the boy for hours now though.

What really interested her was the monster. Initially it hadn't even occurred to her that she could have one too: she thought of it in a dreamlike way that had little to do with real possibility.

She remembered that it was fantastic. That it was like from outer space because if you squeezed it the eyes popped out of their sockets and as soon as you let go they got sucked back in.

Anyway it was too green to be from Earth. That gelatinous liquid too fluorescent to be blood.

Her mother had got it wrong, which provided her cue for the next move. She'd said: 'What's got into your head? Don't think I'm going to buy you everything you want. It's un-educational and even if that's what your friends' mothers do I don't care, understand?'

Irene understood: she had realised that although she might be able to have the thing, in the long run it would make an uneducated woman of her.

During the afternoon her right hand turned itself into a fist without her even noticing, bound up in her memory as she was. The child had given her the monster a bit, without letting it go completely though: he held on to one of its feet. Irene pulled the other four in opposite directions, fascinated by the joints that became transparently thin but never broke off. The boy had stopped crying.

'It's for boys', he had explained, but Irene didn't mind.

'It's really nice', she'd told him, nodding her head like her mother did, then she'd gone back into class.

The rest of the day had been spent like that until, just before the news was on at dinner time, there had been a commercial.

'Turn it off – her mother had said - no television while we're eating'.

When her father had gone to switch it off he had found Irene red in the face with excitement.

'Papà, it comes in the snack packets».

'What does?'

'The monster'.

She walked quickly to keep up with her mother.

'You think it's free, that's natural... but I still have to buy you the snacks... if you don't like them and you don't eat them, there'll be trouble'.

Of course they were still in the road now, and mummy who was complaining about her, but soon there would be the bar, and mummy's friend near the cash desk ready to pay for the first two coffees of the day, and in the big glass case against the wall the snacks, and in the pack her monster. It might come out yellow or orange or green.

It was Marika's week to pay for the coffees. Marika's name was Maria, but mummy, who was her very close friend, was the only one to know: none of the other colleagues were allowed to know. They would drink their coffee together, then leave Irene at school along the way and go to the office.

This morning Marika was jumpy. Instead of waiting for them at the cash desk or counter as she usually did, she was standing at the door of the bar and gesturing impatiently. There was something odd going on, this morning. The customers were strangely restless: instead of concentrating on the coffee machine the barman kept looking at the door and the cashier was grumbling audibly.

'Good morning, Giovanni: two coffees. Giovanni have you started covering for thieves, or what?'

Marika had lowered her voice. Giovanni too.

‘Dottorressa, what are you saying? This lot are police...

plainclothes police: the hawks. They’re watching the bagsnatchers

on the other side of the road, they’ve got to hide

because they can only make arrests if they catch them redhanded,

you know. They’re a real nuisance, they make all my

customers edgy’.

Irene was getting seriously worried about her plans.

‘Mummy, the snacks...’

‘Irene, what are you saying? Does Marika have to get you the

snacks as well, now? Giovanni, we’d like that snack pack, a

separate bill’.

‘Since when has this young lady started wanting snacks in the morning?’

‘Since there’ve been monsters in them... she likes boys’ toys’.

‘I shouldn’t worry, signora, at this age boys or girls it’s all the same’.

But now Irene was neither a boy or a girl anymore. She was an orange monster climbing vertically up the bar counter, sticking its feet to the wet marble, hiding behind the sugar bowl, dodging the saucers, falling. It got up again and with one foot still on the ground stretched its head right up to mummy’s knee. In the mirror she kept an eye on the hawks hidden between the door of the toilet and the ice-cream fridge. Its eyes vomited a jelly-like fluorescent liquid.

‘I don’t know: there’s seems to me to be something violent in these games. I can’t understand it: you handle them roughly,

crush them... everything you don't do with dolls...'

'Ok, Simo', but don't go on, I didn't like dolls either, I always used play with construction games'.

'Exactly, that's just what I'm saying: construction games are creative, you have to follow the rules if you want the tower to stay up, they're... they're... educational. Marika, you tell me what's educational about this horror.'

It had been as they were placing their empty cups on their saucers that the hawks had bolted out of their lair and shot into the street.

While a bag was being snatched on the pavement in front, the hawks had pulled the boy off the moped. He had been waiting near the bar with the engine running so he could get away as fast as possible after the hit.

Now they were dragging him over the threshold.

On the other side, the bag snatcher who, sensing the danger, had tried to disappear down an alley had been stopped by two other hawks positioned in another lair.

The cashier was shouting.

'Not here, for pity's sake, not here.'

The boy, who didn't seem to realise what was happening, was shouting too.

'Hey, I was waiting for my girlfriend, what did you think...'

One of the hawks had silenced him with a fist in the stomach, making him double over on the floor.

The boy did not complain. The next time he had tried to say something he got a kick in the face and as his eyebrow started to

swell, dark blood began dripping from his right nostril and his lip. Then he had looked around the place, trying to catch someone's eye. Up to that moment the customers had been hypnotised by the sight, but now they turned away, Irene's mother too, Marika too; not even the barman looked, but he spoke to him in a low voice as he wiped the marble with his cloth.

'You'd better shut up, otherwise you'll end up like last year'.

Only Irene stared at him. She watched as his jacket got stained with earthly blood, and she hid the orange monster behind the lapel of her coat so it wouldn't get scared: 'Don't you look – she kept murmuring - *you tell me what's educational about this horror?*'