

Inspired by the poem Havisham by Carol Ann Duffy

My fingers were numb, fumbling at the material slung round my neck. I stared at my reflection. A blank expression stared back, eyes were empty hiding my conflicting emotions. My fingers tugged at my shirt collar as it tightened against my throat. A cold sweat settled on my skin. The door cracked open letting in a slither of light. Connie's small frame slipped in. Her shoulders were slouched as she stared sympathetically at me. Her eyes searched mine looking for a sign that I regretted my decision. "You don't have to go through with this." Her voice sounded almost like she was pleading. My mother barged past her, "Connie leave now." She commanded. My mother turned to me, "I'm so proud of you hun." She planted a kiss on my cheek and whispered, "I'll see you at your wedding."

The first time I met Stela Havisham she was a sticky faced, screaming toddler. Even back then she knew how to charm the whole room. Her wide innocent eyes would earn hugs and pats from adoring adults. She would dance and sing which made the adults squeal in delight. My five year old mind could not comprehend why her shrieking babbling brought such joy to others and why it was that when Stela stomped around in her clumpy shoes did she get cheers and claps? When her parents finally tired from showering their precious daughter in praise she was placed in my room probably in the hopes that her brilliance would somehow rub off on me. Once she was out of the centre of attention her previously angelic eyes would become corrupted and narrow. Her toothless smile would widen in to a wicked grin as she scanned the room like a hawk for something to destroy. When I protested, screamed at her to stop her piercing blue eyes would well up with tears and she screamed louder. The ear-splitting sound would shatter our surrounding causing our parents to come running. My toys would be taken away and I was sent to the naughty step in disgrace because I had hurt their treasured daughter's feelings. Stela Havisham was a snake. Every time I saw her she would coil around something I loved and squeeze it to its destruction.

The sky was grumbling, swirling violently outside. I turned my head to the clock. The ticking ringing in my head, counting down, closer to the moment I feared. I stumbled uneasily to the door, tugging at the handle, desperate to be released from this room.

I came home from university to celebrate my parent's 25th anniversary. The party was held in a grand room full of men in expensive black suits and women wearing floor length gowns in a rainbow of colours that moved elegantly while they danced. My parents were surrounded by friends as well as associates. My father was in deep conversation with a grey haired man who radiated intelligence and power. Instead of interrupting their intense discussion my gaze wandered to the people dancing. They danced in perfect time to the live band as though it had been rehearsed previously. The women all twirled gracefully into the arms of another partner and the dance repeated. My gaze was snagged on one girl in particular. She wore a vibrant red dress that clung perfectly to her figure. Her soft chestnut brown hair was pinned up elegantly but small strands had fallen loose while dancing and were now sitting around her neck. I noticed people around me also staring, intrigued by this girl and her beauty. As she twirled round her piercing blue eyes met mine. Stela Havisham. I haven't seen her since she was 14. Six years later she had grown out of her childish immaturity. She didn't look like the girl who used to manipulate people to get what she wanted. Suddenly I had a deep urge to talk to her, like I needed to show her that I too was different. I wanted to see her dazzling smile. My feet were moving, keeping me steady, as I weaved in between people getting closer to her. I straightened my posture trying to convey confidence. Stela's back was turned to me. My hand shook slightly as I reached out for her. As my cold fingers made contact with her skin she looked round. The corners of her mouth moved into that bewitching smile.

The storm danced growing louder and more wild by the second. It started spitting with rain. I hurried quicker down the dark streets to the church. My vision seemed distorted. The buildings around me loomed over me, demonic, ready to pounce. I flinched at every shadow. I hurried faster till the church was in view. I could imagine the scene inside. The revolting combination of green and pink flowers would drown out the beauty of the small church, which was the only thing I got a say in about the wedding. Her side of the church would be filled with her close family and obnoxious friends. Their constant high pitched squealing always made my head split. My side however lacked in comparison. Of course my family would be there but many of them I wouldn't recognise. Their only memories of me would be when I was a small toddler barely forming words. One or two of my friends would have turned up, Stela approved, of course.

My brother was waiting at the door of the church with an expression much like Connie's had been earlier. He was to be my best man, I had no one else to ask. Since Stela had slithered into my life the number of friends I had dwindled down to only a few. I always thought we had just grown apart, became different people but I had a nagging feeling it was Stela's doing.

The sun's rays penetrated the thick cover of the trees. Stela was nestled on my arm, while splayed out on the grass. There was a whiff of coconut from Stela's hair as I drunk in our surroundings. The beach was further away and the waves slowly lapped the shimmering sand. The sea was calm reflecting its surroundings. Stela stirred, her head rose and her sparkling eyes met mine. I stared at her lips as they moved but her words didn't register. Her eye brows burrowed, her expression more annoyed as she repeated herself. "I've picked out a ring for you to give me. I have a few places in mind for you to take me when you propose." I snapped out of the haze. "I....I..." I stammered trying to pronounce words but only a choking sound came out. It was surreal. I tried to think of us together forever but it was too hard to picture. "No." It came out harsher than I expected. Stela's head snapped up, staring at me with shock. She stood taller, eyes blazing, she sneered. Her hand grabbed my shirt. She spat her words like venom. "This is not happening. I am not letting you reject me. I'll give you the ring I want tomorrow," with that she let go and spun on her heels, striding away. I was left frozen as the rain started to drizzle.

I took a deep breath and paused before I entered. I scanned the area one last time taking in my surroundings. The church was idyllic but was drowned in the gloom surrounding it. Something caught my eye. Connie was hiding behind a rose bush trying not to be seen. I was conflicted, should I go through with what I promised? I longed to travel the world with my best friend not spend my life trapped in this miserable place with a woman I didn't love.

I ripped off my bow tie that had been constricting me and ran towards Connie. I grabbed her hand and pulled her along with me. Away from here.