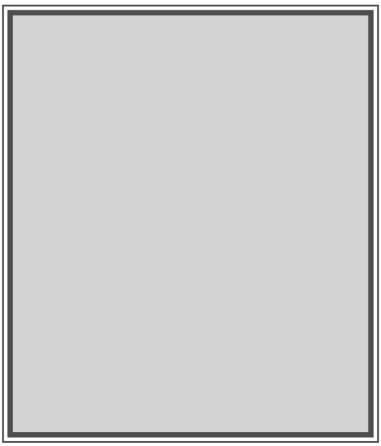
The MONSTERS at the END of the WORLD

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Rebecca Orwin was brought up in Chesterfield, by a mum who loves books and a dad who loves films and ended up loving stories in all their forms. She has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Creative Writing from Newcastle University, and lives in Sheffield with her husband.

The MONSTERS at the END of the WORLD

REBECCA ORWIN

ILLUSTRATED BY ORIOL VIDAL



PUFFIN

CHAPTER ONE

Sunny waited until her mother was asleep before she went back for the monster.

The light had long since faded to nothing. Her window was open, to allow the sounds of the village to drift through to her, and only in the last half-hour had the shufflings and murmured conversations retreated indoors, giving way to the distant rush-and-roll of the sea.

Sunny slid her legs off the bed and into an old pair of shoes. They were too small now and pinched at her toes as she pushed open her bedroom door, but the leather had gone so soft that they allowed her silence as she tiptoed over to the worm-lamp on the kitchen table.

The lamp was a small glass tank containing a couple

of fat glow-worms, each the length of Sunny's hand, whose back ends emitted gentle, green-tinged light. Most people viewed glow-worms as purely functional items – like saucepans, or socks. Treating them as pets was oddball behaviour; naming them, still more so.

Sunny grabbed the loop at the top of Bulby and Radiance's tank, and slipped a thin sheet of black fabric over it, so that only one side was uncovered. Using this feeble, ghostly light, she made her way out of the house and on to the dark, silent, bitingly cold street.

The lack of moon lent the darkness a thick, impenetrable quality that Sunny tried to pretend was not freaking her out. Quickly and quietly, she set off on the same path she had walked with her friends that morning, before everything had changed.

★

'Even the rooster isn't awake yet, Taran,' grumbled Dev, pulling a jumper over his bleary, sleep-addled face. 'This is barbaric.'

'You were the one who suggested going to Far Beach,' muttered Taran, casting a glance over her shoulder to make sure nobody was listening – which, being still tucked up in bed in their own homes, they weren't. 'You said that's

where the meatiest crabs are. Right?'

Dev sighed. 'Right.'

'Then we have to leave early, so nobody realizes how far we've been. Right?'

'Right,' said Dev again, though this time he waited until Taran had turned away and twisted his mouth into a nagging impersonation.

Sunny grinned. She took a deep, salt-tanged breath and shook her shoulders loose. 'I like it when nobody's up,' she said brightly, looking about the sleeping village in a wide-eyed, dreamy way that had been described by more than one villager on more than one occasion as 'creepy'. 'It's like a ghost village.'

When she looked back, everyone was staring at her.

'What?'

'Never mind,' said Taran briskly, before anyone could respond. 'Let's get going.'

★

It was freezing now, spring not quite having shaken off the wintery nights. Sunny wished she had brought an extra jumper, but the thought was no more than a passing flutter in her mind, which was churning with the risk she was taking.

Leaving the village alone was not allowed at the best of times. Doing so at night was so dangerous that she was in with a strong chance of becoming a cautionary tale. She could stumble blindly into Burnt Land and toast her lungs from the inside, get eaten by wolves, or simply trip, break her ankle and never be found. All of these had happened to foolish children of the past.

And none of that took the monster into account.

Sunny shook these thoughts out of her head. No point worrying about the consequences now – she was out, it was happening, and she would see it through.

She held the worm-lamp close to the ground as she reached the North Road, so that she could watch her footing on the Olden tarmac, riddled with cracks and potholes so long untended that they were like miniature jungles. When the road began to curve away from the sea, she held up the lamp, looking for the pale golden path that cut through the dunes.

Not two minutes later, she heard the monster shriek.

★

The strange, high-pitched keening reached them on the wind.

Everyone stopped. Dev's hand shot out to clutch Sunny's elbow, jostling the bag of crabs.

'What was that?' asked Nea, with affected nonchalance.

'Was it a wolf?' whispered Dev, squeezing Sunny so tightly she flinched.

'Can't have been,' said Taran. 'The wolves were spotted heading north last week.'

'A seagull?'

'What kind of demon seagull wails *like that?!'*

'Shh, there it is again!'

★

Sunny froze, heart thudding in her chest.

It was definitely still here, then, which meant it must still be stuck. The handle of the worm-lamp was slippery in her sweaty hand. She rearranged her fingers to grip it more tightly and kept moving, up the slope of the dune, where that morning they had been able to see the sun glinting off the ocean, and down the other side. She knew she was close when she heard a sudden, angry hissing.

She stopped, not wanting to stumble into it by accident. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the black fabric off the worm-lamp and raised it up, casting the glow another couple of metres.

And there was the monster.