

THE WORLD WITHOUT US

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B L O O M S B U R Y

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One

For indeed the ascetic workers, her daughters, regard the queen above all as the organ of love, indispensable, certainly, and sacred, but in herself somewhat unconscious . . .

Maurice Maeterlinck

I

He'd been climbing for three hours when he saw the odd colour through the tawny trees. In a clearing by the Repentance River, a pale column. As he drew closer he realised it was a woman. She was barefoot and partly clothed, her head skewed back, eyes on the sky. Evangeline Müller, his neighbour from that large wooden house on Fox's Lane.

As he entered the glade, his heavy boots shattered sticks and dry leaves and he thought he ought to exaggerate these noises or call out – she was still undressing. He'd have quite liked to linger, just watching. But that would be creepy, he chided himself, don't be a creep. And then she turned, her chest completely bare, and, without flinching, caught his eye.

It's you, she said.

Her tone was dull, as if she'd been expecting him, or maybe someone else. Or perhaps it was simply relief in her voice. She shifted a hip to one side, folded one arm across her body. It was then he noticed the waxy scars, roping her chest and back.

Jim Parker, he said, offering a stupidly distant hand. I walk up here most Sundays. And you're ... ?

... Going in, she said as she tossed her shirt to the ground.

Jim, not trusting his eyes to stay on her face, glanced instead at the river. He'd spent his adulthood trying to be decent; it was in his raising, it was in his mother's quiet asides, which after her death had gained the solemnity of commandments. James, don't ever be that kind of guy, she'd say after some encounter with some male, and he'd wonder what had offended her, which leery word, which gesture. Lately, though, he'd been letting this credo slide – it might not have sprung from himself after all, though he could not say what other substance he was made of.

There was no towel near the woman, he noticed, just the small mound of clothes to which she was adding her skirt. A strange place to swim. The river was broad here, then narrowed sharply as it flowed towards the cliff. You could hear the cascades, a two-hundred-metre drop said his map; you could feel the earth's tremor from the force of that falling current. Upstream there were more tranquil, sunnier swimming holes. And she surely knew those – she'd spent her childhood at the nearby commune. Jim had wandered through its gutted remains: the burned husk of a hexagonal hall, the charred footings of the former cabins.

After just three months in Bidgalong Valley he'd come to know the Ghost Mountains well, following trails on a map bought at the town market. As he walked he realised the fey place names – Rainbow Hill, Naiad Gorge, Moonbeam Falls – had replaced all the indigenous names, and were absurd. This morning he'd set out early, following the river to a tapered ridge, pausing at a creek to scoop and gulp water, glorying in the wild-man spectacle of his thirst. He could pretend, in the surround sound of wind, water, leaf and bird, that the forest was pristine, that he was born to it and belonged.

Evangeline was still undressing, unperturbed. Jim, ignorant of what to do with hands, eyes, unruly thoughts, crossed to the embankment, then stuck a hand in.

Wow, that is cold, he said, as if he hadn't already felt that water, minutes back, down his throat.

He scanned the river, guessing the distance from here to the falls, the depth and speed of the flow, assuming the guise of another, less febrile man, the sort to coolly gauge and secure things – risks, locks, errant nails, threats, trip hazards – the dependable, sexless dad of the hardware store and the back shed of widgets, to tamp down his desire.

Now the water was strung with reflected clouds, and the canopy, backlit, was dark as the earth. This world, two hundred and fifty above sea-level, inverted. The river, beyond his reckoning. It seemed as cryptic as the woman readying herself to swim in it.

He shook out his hand. Then wrung his shirtsleeve and watched the drips hover in the green air. In the valley you'd hardly know it was winter; in the valley, the unceasing treacly sun.

When he turned back she was just about naked – a habit maybe from her commune days and her unself-consciousness persuaded him: he was surely guilty of something. After all they were practically strangers – he'd only seen her a few times before – at the market where the family ran their honey stall, and late one afternoon at the River School when she'd come to collect her youngest's things. Jim watched from the office as she crossed the playground. She was arresting – stately maybe was what you'd call her, with blue-hued skin and large grey eyes. She had the long-skirted sandalled look of other hippies around town, but had made this uniform hers, the tuck of her shirt, the way her sleeves were rolled, the hair somehow both secured and falling down. She wore no make-up and he fancied he could see

grief's traces in the dull rings beneath her eyes. In one hand, an umbrella, despite the dry weather. She folded it slowly before coming in. She's taken her time, said the office secretary. It had been nearly two years since the funeral and the girl's belongings were gaffered up in the storeroom. The eldest – Tess – was in Jim's class and yet to speak a word. From the glassed-in office, Jim watched the woman lean, shuck off a shoe and edge a foot up the wall behind her. She remained there, stork-like, for some minutes. Poor soul, said Jane Bond, stapling worksheets. But Jim had felt no pity watching Mrs Müller; her left leg bared to the knee, he'd had other feelings entirely.

She was bending over her clothes now, wearing nothing but plain cotton knickers. Sylvie wore this kind of thing on weekends. But Jim didn't want to think of her and weekly texts. Or the postcards featuring the Sydney hotels they'd stolen into last summer, where they'd fucked by the rooftop pools. Sylvie had tried guessing – which hotel had they conceived at? The Radisson or Hilton? The Park Suites or The Quays? But Jim, newly ordained a father, had not been able to think of anything but her cells dividing, her augmenting blood. And now felt guilty – he'd deleted her texts, he hadn't phoned her since moving away – and as he looked fully at the body of this woman stepping into the Repentance River, his mind turned soupy, then entirely blank.

Evangeline stood naked, arms out and teetering. Even sunk to the ankles in river mud she was imperial. He knew the rumours, which Ms Bond had glossed between each staple crunch. How she was seen very rarely in town, and always below that umbrella, in cloudy or clear weather. How she'd been spied walking back roads with an empty pram, intent on something, but never, he got the sense from the staffroom chorus, doing what she ought.

And here she is, breaking his morning's *samādhi*, his wilderness *vipassana*, the goals he'd set since arriving. Here she is fucking with his silent walking attempt *to come out of suffering*, out of mental impurity, his quest for non-delusion. He'd been on his way, hadn't he, ticking off the precepts – no killing, stealing, sex, false speaking, intoxicants. He was advancing, with some exceptions, and after fasting and celibacy had even reached step 8: *to abstain from using high or luxurious beds*. He ticked that off grandiosely, without protest, or even laughter.

But what's he thinking now, unlacing his boots and saying, Perhaps I should – ah?

She hesitates in the knee-high, hectic water. Then a new sound makes him straighten. Not far off, a labouring grunt, a threshing, as if something's being dragged through the scrub.

They wait and listen, tuning in together.

He checks her face, then tugs off his right boot, unpeels a sock. Her body, waist deep, is mirrored, and her long twin, conjoined at the hip, undulates on the water. Then she slides completely under and for minutes, she is gone. Fifty metres upstream, her arms slicing very precisely through the current.

Jim piles his things beside hers then – right away – regret. His lifeless clothes, her underwear, adjacent, incriminate him, and his empty boots, just ahead, seem a kind of manifestation. Their toes are angled away from the water, as if to say, *abandon*.

He stands, shivering in an old pair of boxers. Tall, broad-chested, hunched over his own flesh. He'd prefer to just forget his body, and its limited power over others. Swimming's the last thing he feels like, but he can't just leave her alone in there. That wouldn't be chivalrous, considering the falls. And again, that sound, drawing closer, though nothing can be seen through the leaning blood-woods – no animal with prey, no human.

She seems to be treading water, paused – or waiting. Her face with the hair slicked off, more vulnerable. Then, as he nears the riverbank, Jim notices, a short distance from where she's left her things, a hammer and some rope.