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A Novel

By William Bowles

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Installment 15

The meeting was chaotic. Half the women were near hysterical with fear. Some protested that we were being paranoid and that this wasn't Nazi Germany, this was England. Jean Terson, who was chairing the meeting, if that's what you can call it, said virtually nothing. Eventually it broke up without a decision of any kind being arrived at. A few were determined to leave. And some had already left, I discovered. Yet what could we do as a group? Who even knew we were here or cared for that matter? A few dozen women and their young children, cut off from the world and with no help. I left the meeting utterly depressed but by the time I got back to the house, I realised that we had no choice, we had to leave. Judy, who had stayed with the girls was way ahead of me and was already packing up essentials by the time I got back. She didn't even bother to ask me how the meeting went, instead urging me to get packed. We left about two hours later, speaking to no one and headed into the night not knowing where we were going.

We drove until the sun came up, and tired and hungry, we looked for somewhere to eat and to consider our options. We found a café in a small village somewhere in the Cheshire Dales maybe twenty miles outside Manchester. The girls were silent and exhausted. Except for us, the café was empty. We picked at our food but nobody had much of an appetite. Eventually Judy spoke.

'We need to find a place to stay for a couple of days.'

I nodded, feeling too tired to respond.

'Look, we have money in the bank, plenty in fact. We need to decide whether to stay here or head for Europe. The problem with going to Europe is we have to go through customs. Will they be looking for us and if they are, will they try and stop us?'

Finally, I said 'Okay, let's find that hotel, a decent one.'

We paid up and asked the waitress if there was a decent hotel or a bed and breakfast place nearby. She directed us to a couple of places and we dragged ourselves out to the car and headed off.

Instead of a hotel, we found a large and rambling B&B remotely situated deep in the Dales. The owner, a Mrs Fanshawe, was a friendly middle-aged widow, only too happy to take us in, it was after all, past the end of the season and aside from us, the place was empty. She could moreover, supply us with lunch or dinner as well as the ubiquitous English breakfast if we wanted.

We slept for most of what was left of the day, only waking up when the girls, bored and restless roused us. Then Mrs Fanshawe announced that dinner was ready and we ate a well-cooked meal of roast lamb and fresh vegetables and then retired to a very comfortable

living room which surprisingly, had a large and comprehensive library and even a connection to the 'Net. Mrs Fanshawe brought us coffee and soft drinks for the girls and asked us if we minded her joining us. Perhaps she was lonely? In any case, we were actually glad of her company. The girls were already on the computer, occasionally glancing our way but as ever, discreet with their comments in the presence of a stranger. Mrs Fanshawe started by giving us the rundown on the locality and asking us if we were just passing through or exploring the Dales? I suppose it was part of her usual pitch to visitors; how beautiful the Dales were, where to go and what see. After the past couple of days, the normality of it was difficult to adjust to. We answered in a non-committal way, that we had no fixed plan and we were taking it one day at a time. All through the chit-chat, she kept glancing at the girls who were intensely scribbling notes and glancing at us as if bursting to tell us something. I don't know what triggered it, but out of the blue, Mrs Fanshawe suddenly said to me,

'I don't know where, but your face is very familiar, have you been this way before?'

'No never.'

The girls went very quiet and an embarrassed silence descended.

'Look, I'm sorry if you think I'm being nosy but I don't get that many visitors this late in the season and well...'

She trailed off, looking very uncomfortable. Judy broke the silence.

'It's no problem really it isn't.'

The whole setting had the air of Agatha Christie about it; the chintz upholstered chairs, the ruffled curtains, Mrs Fanshawe in her flowered apron and immaculate perm. I started to giggle, more out of nervousness or maybe it was just the tension, whatever it was, it was infectious. Now Mrs Fanshawe was the embarrassed one, not sure if were laughing at her or some private joke. Flustered and beetroot-faced, she got up to leave.

'I'm sorry, really I am. We're not laughing at you. Please don't leave, it's just that it's been a long day and I suppose we're exhausted what with all the driving and the girls cooped up in the car, you know how it is.'

The girls gave me one of their looks but said nothing.

Still flustered, Mrs Fanshawe sat down but clearly my answers didn't satisfy her one bit. Then a look of recognition passed over her face which she tried, ineffectually, to hide.

'You're one of those people who... changed,' she said, embarrassed by her choice of words. 'It's okay really, it doesn't bother me but I saw a photograph of you and your daughter on the tv today. I find it difficult to believe what they're saying about you.'

'Saying? What are they saying?' I had that sinking feeling in my tummy.

‘Mama, that’s what we wanted to tell you. The government are accusing you and Judy of taking Rebecca.’

‘Look,’ Mrs Fanshawe said, ‘I don’t know what the real truth is, but I’m not inclined to believe the government, especially after the events of the past few months. I’m sure you had a good reason for what you did,’ she glanced at Rebecca, ‘and God knows, the world’s in a turmoil. I’m not about to phone the authorities, believe me. And you can stay here as long as you like.’ As an afterthought, she said, ‘And don’t worry about the money...’

‘Believe me Mrs Fanshawe, money is the least of our problems right now.’

‘Please, call me Betty.’

‘Okay, Betty, and yes it’s true, we did take Rebecca without permission, technically that is. She’s not my daughter or Judy’s. Her mother was... well she died and we sort of adopted her I suppose...but it’s more complicated than that.’

‘You don’t have to explain. I read about the place you’ve been staying in and I know what’s been happening to people, like you...’

‘So everybody knows?’

‘Yes, it’s some kind of place they’ve had you hidden in, at least that’s what the tv said, but that news of its location had somehow leaked out and they wanted to move you all to a safe location.’

‘That’s what they said? That we were being moved for our own protection?’

‘Well yes.’

Had we done the right thing? Were they really moving us to protect us? A feeling of total helplessness came over me. What to believe?

‘But obviously, you don’t think so do you?’

I looked at Judy, not knowing what to say. She just sat there, mute.

‘We don’t think so Betty.’

‘Well where did they intend to take you? Do you think that they...?’ Betty’s voice trailed off. ‘Oh no! You don’t think that they intended to,’ she looked at the girls, who sat there, silent. ‘Surely not.’

‘Well, we’re not sure about anything but we didn’t intend to find out, so we left, last night.’

‘I have two daughters of my own you know. They’re grown up of course and married with children of their own now. My husband died quite recently. So what will you do? They must be looking for you.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Look, you can stay as long as you like. It gets quite lonely here you know, I could do with the company and the girls will love it here. There’s lots to see and do.’

‘Let’s take it one day at a time shall we.’

‘Yes of course.’

With that, we went to bed. During the night Valentina climbed into bed with me and held on to me as if her life depended on it, which I suppose it did.

I woke up early. Valentina was at the window, staring out into the Dales. She turned toward me and started to say something then stopped.

‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing Mama.’

She turned back to the window.

‘It’s beautiful outside. Can we go for a walk?’

‘Of course we can. Let’s have a bath, get dressed and then we have one of those giant B&B breakfasts.’

She knew of course, that I was trying to be ‘normal’ and she went along with the masquerade.

Over the next few days we went on long walks through the Dales even though it was getting colder. The emptiness and the beauty of the landscape enabled us to forget what was happening elsewhere, at least for a time. The girls loved it though and left to themselves I’m sure they would have quite happily tramped over every inch of the place, exploring every plant, stopping continually like a pair of diminutive and obsessive botanists to discuss their latest discovery. God knows what they talked about but the conversations were intense and had all the appearance of a serious scientific investigation with plants laid out on the ground maybe for comparison whilst they debated who knew what? At first they would ask us for information but quickly realized that our store of botanical knowledge was rather limited. The issue of why we’d fled or what we would do next was never raised as if by mutual consent, although I had the distinct feeling that the girls were plotting something. Judy had picked up on it as well, pointing out that they were in contact with the other kids over the Web, although Judy had no idea what they talked about as they’d gotten rather secretive when it came to their communications with the other girls.

You might wonder why we didn’t ask them what they were up to if anything, and I really have no answer except to say that perhaps I didn’t want to know? No, that’s a cop out, the truth is, I was afraid to ask, irrationally thinking that we could hide out in the Dales indefinitely. The problem was that it was extremely difficult not to fall into the trap of

thinking that the girls really were just that, little girls, when the reality was that they were, well...what were they? Deep down, I know that sooner rather than later I'd have to confront the issue. However, I was pre-empted by the girls themselves.

“Mama, we have to move.”

We were having dinner when Valentina dropped her bombshell. Rebecca nodded emphatically, reinforcing Valentina's statement with a world-wise look that always proved so disconcerting on the face of a little girl that I could never get used to it.

“Move?” I said, with a sinking feeling in my stomach, knowing full well what she meant.

“Yes Mama, we have to go soon.”

“What tonight?” I asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“How do you know? What do you know? And where are we going to go?”

Valentina and Rebecca got up from the table and took us both by the hand like we were the children, over to the computer where they sat down and indicated that they had something to show us. It was a message from one of the other girls from the house in Wales along with a note from her mother, June. I tried to remember who she was but couldn't put a face to the name but Judy knew who she was.

“She left before us. In fact a couple of days before we left.”

“Scotland,” said Valentina. “We have to go to Scotland Mama.”

The note explained it all. After I'd read it, I felt rather ashamed and pretty useless realizing that during the time we'd spent in Wales some of the new mothers had not been playing victim and had been organizing, making contact with plenty of other organizations, especially women's organizations. We weren't alone.

“Half the planet's population are women you know. All it took was time. Did you really think they would stand by and do nothing while you got butchered?” said Judy.

I didn't know what to say. Had I been so blind and wrapped up in my own troubles? As if sensing my self-incrimination Judy said,

“Don't blame yourself Nova, you did what you had to do and you came through it all and Valentina is all the proof you need.”

It was all too much for me and I just broke down and burst into tears. Valentina rushed to my side and held onto me for dear life but said nothing, she just brushed my tears away as they poured down my face. Hearing the commotion Mrs Fanshawe rushed into the room.

“Is everything alright?”

Feeling embarrassed by my outburst I tried to stem the flow of tears and started to apologise but Mrs Fanshawe would have nothing of it and fussed around us, not asking what was wrong but merely trying to reassure and comfort us with offers of cups of tea and lots of sympathy. Judy explained to her that we had to leave in the morning, that we were sorry it was such short notice and she had been so kind to us but she merely tutted and told us what a joy it had been having us here and that she would genuinely miss us, especially the girls who were such a wonder. I think she was on the verge of crying as well but she held it back and retreated to the kitchen rather than reveal her emotions, only to return with a tray of hot chocolate and biscuits.

There was something quite bizarre about our circumstances as my daughter, just over a year old, in her clipped language and high-pitched little girl voice explained the events that had been taking place whilst we had been hiding out in Mrs Fanshawe’s B&B.

“Mama, the new girls are all in Scotland that’s why we have to go. They need us. We don’t need to hide anymore. There’s no reason to be afraid.”

All of it delivered matter-of-factly like a report, with Rebecca nodding wisely by her side. I can’t emphasise too much just how different they really are. Such assuredness. Could it be that when Valentina was in my tummy, she had been busy absorbing my knowledge? Perhaps that’s what those dreams had been about. It was all too fantastic, yet what else could explain her world-wise behaviour and understanding? Was this what the mutation was all about. Some kind of genetically inherited memory, where my knowledge and experience gets to be passed on to her, ready for use? I realized just how much I didn’t know. So much energy had been directed toward survival in world hostile to us, when we should have been rejoicing in these wonderful children and trying to discover what it was that had happened and what made them tick.

“So what is happening in Scotland Valentina? You say that we’re safe, that there is no reason to be afraid. What’s been happening and how come we didn’t know?”

Valentina and Rebecca exchanged conspiratorial looks, looking all of a sudden just like ordinary little girls who had been caught out doing something naughty.

“Well...it’s complicated and there was lots to do.”

“Like what?” I said.

What had they been up to? And why was she being so secretive?

“If the government knew what we were doing they would have tried to stop us.”

“Do? What have you been trying to do Valentina and why didn’t you tell us?”

The two girls looked embarrassed and shuffled from foot to foot, not sure how to answer me. Then it struck me that they really were little girls, almost like ‘idiot savants’. Appearances can be deceptive. Knowledge was one thing but wisdom was something else. It was as if they operated on an instinctual level, out of pure survival but not really able to comprehend the big picture in spite of what appeared to be their innate genius. Perhaps that’s where we were going wrong in trying to understand them. Perhaps they weren’t so different after all.

“Are you angry with me Mama?”

“No of course I’m not, it’s just that...” I didn’t know what to say. Then Judy came to my rescue.

“The problem is Valentina, is that we know so little about you. You do realize just how different you are don’t you?”

Valentina and Rebecca both nodded, “Yes, that’s why they want us to die.”

“Well the point is, we sometimes forget that you are still children. It’s difficult for us to know how you think, what you are thinking. This is all so new. We’re not even sure we really understand you or if you understand us.”

“But we’re not really different. We’re all girls aren’t we?”

“Yes of course we are.”

“It’s the men who hate us, who want us to die.”

“Well not all men.”

“Then why do some men want us to die?”

“Well it’s complicated but they are afraid of you and they’re afraid of losing their power.”

“You mean the government?”

“Well yes but not just the government.”

Then I realized that we had never sat down and explained how the world worked, how power and vested interests worked and that it was men who ran pretty well everything, who made the laws.

“Valentina, the world we live in was made by men. It’s been that way for hundreds of years. They run the governments, business, education, well everything really. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She nodded but it was obvious that the implications of what I'd said meant little to her, and why should it? She might have absorbed all kinds of facts and she might be able to absorb it all in record time but sorting it out, making the connections was something that only experience could supply. I fear we'd made a fundamental error of judgment but then given the circumstances what else could we have done? I suppose too, I just wanted her to be my little girl, not to deny her, her precious and irreplaceable childhood. I wanted to protect her from the world no matter what the cost. I realized then that I would have no hesitation in killing to protect her or even sacrificing my own life to protect hers. The realization rocked me, as it signified that I'd made the final break with my past self and that, in some way I'd been afraid or perhaps intimidated by Valentina, as if she was some kind of monster possessed of superhuman powers, when she was really just my little girl, my daughter, who still needed protecting, still needed all my love, a mother's love for her child.

Gazing at the two girls, they were just children, naively caught up in world of infinite complexity and one undergoing a revolution. What had I expected from them?

"God, look at the time! It's gone one in the morning, it's time for you two to go to bed. We've got a long day in front of us."

Surprised by my outburst, the girls just looked at each other in amazement but didn't protest. Even Judy looked surprised.

"Have you had some kind of revelation?"

"Sort of, " I said.

I didn't sleep much, I was too nervous. After we'd put the girls to bed, I realized that I still didn't know why or where in Scotland we were going. I felt like events were beyond my control, yet Valentina was quite sure that everything was going to be alright. I drifted off, half-dreaming that perhaps the nightmare was over.

I was exhausted. The parting with Mrs. Fanshawe had been all tears and hugs and promises of staying in touch, one I vowed to keep. We were, it seemed, headed for Oban on the West coast of Scotland and a full day's drive. The girls didn't stop nattering, as they tried to tell us what had happened, who would be there, although they were less sure about what would happen once we arrived.

It seems however that the government had given up trying to herd us into 'protective custody' after mass protests, composed mostly of women, had forced a rethink. How all of this occurred without our knowledge is totally our own fault. We simply shut ourselves off

from the outside world and the significance of it was beyond the capability of the girls to relay to us. Or perhaps they assumed we knew? Whatever, events had passed us by. Judy kept telling me not to blame myself, she too had been oblivious to events or like me, had deliberately ignored the outside world. As we drove toward Scotland, I kept thinking of what we'd left behind and how unfair it was. The time we'd spent in the Dales was the only time I'd spent with Valentina away from all the madness, just trying to get to know her and frankly, in spite of the fact that I knew we couldn't have hidden out there indefinitely, I already missed Mrs Fanshawe and those wild and beautiful dales and the time spent tramping over them with the girls. Just observing them as they soaked in the landscape, as they chatted incessantly about every new thing they saw and the intensity of their curiosity often moved me to tears of love and awe. If this was the future, a world without men, then I was all for it.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

Judy's voice broke my reverie.

“Are we there already?”

“No, we just crossed into Scotland. Perhaps another three hours to Oban.”

The girls had fallen asleep in the back and were wrapped around each other.

“So, you've sitting there gazing into space for ages.”

“No, I was just thinking that, well, how wonderful it was to be a mother and to have been blessed with Valentina. Frankly, it's difficult for me to remember what it was like before...before the change. If I was religious, I think I'd call what I've been through an epiphany and no matter what happens, just having brought my little girl into the world made everything I've been through worth it.”

Judy looked at me strangely and then smiled but said nothing, as if mulling over my words.

“Well I must say, I never seen you looking so contented, smug even. Does this mean you've finally accepted who you are?”

“Absolutely, I couldn't be happier really. And you?”

“Yes, except...”

“Except what?”

“I couldn't bear to lose Rebecca, not now.”

“Have you not thought about having a kid?”

“Well yes, I suppose so but I've never found a man I'd be happy to have one with and I think I was too selfish to raise a child on my own but you and Valentina and now Rebecca, well it's changed everything hasn't it.”

“And you’re not on your own, you’ve got us.”

“Nova, have you thought about a man?”

“A man, what of my own you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Good lord no! What on earth made you say that?”

“I don’t know really, perhaps sheer curiosity. After all, you are a woman and well...”

“Judy, I do believe you’re blushing.”

“Am I?”

We both laughed.

“In all honesty, I can tell you the idea of sex with a man hasn’t crossed my mind, and probably for the first time in my life, well since puberty anyway, the idea of sex with anybody hasn’t occurred to me.”

“Have you not...,” Judy paused. “Have you not well, played with yourself?”

“That’s a strange way of putting it but now that you ask, yes of course I have.”

“And?”

“Well it was extremely pleasurable but in all honesty, it’s difficult for me to relate to my own sexual feelings as I have nothing to measure them by.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I’m not sure really except that had I born a girl then I would have gone through puberty and experienced sexual awakening and longings but I missed out on all that. I mean I can’t say what I’ll feel in the future but surely it can’t have escaped your notice that we haven’t exactly been surrounded by men for the past year.”

“Except for last Christmas.”

“Well yes, but that didn’t really count, I was still not sure who I was then and embarrassed at even showing my femininity. And in any case, he was your friend and anyway, he was well, a bit of a dufus.”

“Hey! That’s my friend you’re talking about, but yes, you’re probably right.”

“And to be honest, I suppose I’ve avoided exploring my own sexuality, until now perhaps. Frankly, my own body has felt like an alien landscape, full of unknowns and unexplored territory. I wonder what kind of sexuality Valentina will have?”

“Now that’s something to think about!”

“We don’t even know when she’ll reach puberty but at the rate she’s growing, it might be sooner than we think.”

“I wonder about that. Have you noticed that her rate of growth has slowed down quite a lot recently?”

“Yes, perhaps it’s only for the first year or so that she shoots up? God, there’s so much we don’t know.”

I turned around and saw that the girls were both wide awake and listening intently to our conversation and I felt a little embarrassed that we’d been talking about them in front of them.

“Been listening long have you?”

Valentina nodded and grinned at me in the most disconcerting fashion as if to say ‘don’t worry, I understand’ and turned to Rebecca and whispered something in her ear and Rebecca nodded knowingly and they both giggled.

“Mama, we need to pee.”

The house, well actually it was a mansion, was a massive, rambling affair, obviously built over the years, if not centuries and consisted of a central three-story structure, built of gray granite that had been added to at the sides, the back, the top and with a number of standalone buildings dotted around the periphery that could have been stables, or perhaps a farm. The buildings had obviously seen better days. Some had scaffolding around them and enormous sheets of green tarpaulin covering sections of roof that flapped in the stiff breeze. The place was set in what appeared to be a park, but one that had seen better days, largely overgrown with just the outlines of what had obviously been formal gardens lining the pothole-filled drive that led to the main building. The open space in front of main house was jammed, with cars, trucks, vans, motorbikes, Winnebagos, campers, caravans, you name it. There must have been at least two hundred vehicles, maybe more. Dotted around the ‘formal’ gardens were more campers and tents. The place looked like a gathering of ‘travellers’.

Getting in had been no problem. It seems we were ‘expected’. The girls were besides themselves with excitement and chattered away about this or that girl from Wales who would be here. I felt overwhelmed by it all after the quiet of the Dales. We found a place to park and made our way to the entrance of the main building, up the steps and into the foyer.

The foyer was crowded and the noise of chattering girls was deafening, echoing around the high, ornate but crumbling ceiling. To one side was a line of tables that had PCs on them with women clacking away at keyboards. A big sign behind the tables read, ‘New Arrivals Please Report Here for Registration’. Hanging from the ceiling was a vast banner that read ‘New Gurls Convention – Defending the Rights of Evolving Womenhood!’

I looked around and couldn't see a single man present.

"You must be Nova and this must be Valentina. Welcome."

I turned round and was confronted by a very tall woman, well over six feet, coffee-coloured skin with long straight, jet black hair and features that could have belonged to one of half-dozen 'races'. A long and quite narrow aquiline nose, a broad and full mouth, large brown eyes that had a slight Asian slant to them and high, prominent cheek bones. She wore a bright red sweater, black leggings on her long, muscular but shapely legs and black 'bovver boots'.

"Welcome," she repeated "I'm Maxine," extending an elegant and well manicured hand to me. She turned to Judy and Rebecca.

"And you must be Judy and this must be Rebecca. We're so happy you've finally made it, we were somewhat concerned for your well-being. Luckily your girls have more sense than you have."

I found myself resenting Maxine's somewhat abrasive manner but resisted the temptation to respond to the putdown. Before I could say anything Maxine said,

"You must be tired after your journey. You can register later. Let's get you hooked up with a place to sleep and then I'll show you round and fill you in," she boomed.

I looked at Judy who just shrugged and nodded. The girls just stood there gawping at this 'Amazon' of a woman, and for once kept quiet.

"I know, you must have a thousand questions, but first do you need help with any luggage you've brought with you?"

"No, we can manage. Why don't you show us where we're sleeping."

"Yes-yes, of course, follow me."

We threaded our way through the crowded foyer and up the grand staircase 'covered' in threadbare red carpet.

"We've saved a space for our 'guests of honour' she boomed.

"Guests of honour?"

"Of course Nova. You and Valentina are the first of the New Gurls."

She emphasized the 'u' of gurls.

"Well we don't want any special treatment. After all, there's..."

"Nonsense! You far too modest."

"Yes but, it's not as if I did anything."

"You survived my dear and against all the odds."

It was all too much for me and I was hit by a wave of fatigue that made me stagger as we walked along a long corridor on the first floor. Judy grabbed hold of me and Valentina squealed with alarm and squeezed my hand with all her force.

“Mama!”

“I’m okay, really I am. I’m just exhausted.”

“Yes-yes, let’s get you into bed my dear.”

We finally arrived at a door that Maxine unlocked from an enormous bunch of keys. The room was vast with floor to ceiling windows framed with moth-eaten velvet curtains. An enormous marble fireplace dominated one wall and although the overall impression was one of shabbiness, it looked and smelt clean. There were two, queen sized beds, a dressing table, a long antique table by the windows, a couple of tatty armchairs and a door that led through to a bathroom.

“I’m sorry it’s a bit shabby but it’s clean and warm, the bath works and there’s plenty of hot water. I’m sure you’ll be very comfortable here.”

Judy nodded and thanked her whilst the kids explored the room. I sank onto the bed. It’s last thing I remember doing.
