

# XX

A Novel  
by  
William Bowles

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

Installment 16

‘Mama, wake up.’

I swam up into consciousness and slowly opened my eyes, squinting against the bright light that flooded into the room from the tall windows. Valentina was squatting on the end of the bed grinning at me. I wanted to role over and go back to sleep but I knew that she wouldn’t let me.

‘Mama, you must get up.’

‘Uh-huh,’ I grunted.

As I squinted at her against the light I was overwhelmed with a feeling of love for her that somehow she sensed and she scrabbled across the bed and wrapped herself around me smelling of soap and clean clothes. As I lay there with my daughter snuggled up to me it dawned on me that for the first time I felt at peace and knew with a certainty that I would go through everything all over again just for the joy Valentina had brought me. We lay there for a while saying nothing, just content with each other’s company but eventually Valentina got the wriggles and I knew it was time to get up and find out what was going on in this place.

Valentina was my guide and taking me by the hand she took me down the grand staircase and along a corridor until we entered an enormous room, perhaps the former ballroom or banqueting hall that now served as a canteen. A long line of people snaked along the window side of the hall whilst dozens of children dodged around the ranks of tables that filled most of the room. The noise was deafening. Girls called out to Valentina. She seemed to be a celebrity and she turned to me proudly with a large smile.

‘They’re all here Mama.’

‘Yes, so it would seem.’

Letting go of my hand she rushed off to join the other girls. Frankly, I was a bit overwhelmed by the entire situation.

‘Nova! Over here!’

Judy stood in the queue waving to me and I made my way through the kids and the tables.

‘Well I’m glad to see you’re up at last.’

‘I must have been exhausted. I don’t remember a thing from last night except getting here.’

‘You were dead to the world.’

Judy introduced me to the people that were in the queue with her. All were new mothers, one or two, who looked a little shell-shocked bombarded me with questions as if I had some special knowledge to impart and looked decidedly let down when I had little to offer on the subject. As the queue shuffled forward I checked out the people in the room and realised that there wasn't a single man present and all were young that is from their late teens through to maybe their thirties.

'Are we all changelings here?' I asked.

'Most of us are', volunteered a petite and very pregnant woman standing next to me who giggled at my use of the word 'changeling'.

'Well I never know what to call us and changeling seems as good a word as any.'

'The PC word is evolved women', she volunteered.

'Yes I see from the banner.'

'Though as far as we're concerned, we're just mothers, or mothers-to-be' she added.

Eventually we got to the serving area where I had to make do with tea, as the coffee was awful and we found a place to sit. I had so many questions but didn't know where to start so I sat and listened to the chatter of these mothers and mothers-to-be. It was a far cry from my own experience for here were dozens, hundreds maybe, of people including quite a few from other countries, who had gathered together for strength and protection. So had I been wrong about some kind of Nazi extermination programme? After awhile I realised that the conversation in spite of the participants was not unlike the ones I had at my pre-natal classes. They all seemed to be ordinary mothers. Should I have been surprised? Eventually, the petite woman, whose name was Diane (her mother had chosen the name) got round to asking me what it was like to be the first?

'Awful,' I responded.

'You mean you don't like being a woman, a mother?' Incredulous.

'Oh no, I love Valentina, she's the apple of my eye and now I've been through it, I just can't imagine going back to my...old life, not that I have a choice. But back then, it seems like an age ago, I had no idea, I mean, well we were getting murdered, our children...'

'Well thank god, that's not going to happen here.' All the other women joined in with a chorus of support and agreement.

'So what's changed then?' I asked.

'What's changed? Well Maxine for one.'

'Ah yes, Maxine.'

‘Yes, you must have met her yesterday.’

‘Yes but only briefly, we didn’t get round to talking.’

‘She got the Movement organised. Well it wasn’t just her but she started the Movement.’

Could I have been so out of touch?

‘So when did this all happen? Surely not when we were in Wales, wouldn’t we would have heard something?’

‘Oh she’s not one of us, she’s a normal.’

‘You mean she’s un-evolved?’

‘Yes. She started up the organisation.’

‘This is her place you know’, another woman chipped in.

‘Oh I see.’ But I didn’t really.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Well in the Cheshire Dales actually.’

‘Maxine is the MP here and after the Welsh incident, she tried to force the government to do something to protect us and although they promised to not much happened so she decided that as the men couldn’t be relied on, then it was up to women to rally around us. After all, we are all women and soon, we’ll really outnumber the men. If we stick together, what can they do? Kill all of us? So she got together with the Women’s Institute...’

‘The Women’s Institute?’ I laughed.

‘Yes, I know it’s weird isn’t it but they’re national, I mean they have branches all over the country. Anyway, Maxine got together with the WI and then other organisations joined in, and well it just snowballed.’

‘So are there other places like this?’

‘Well apparently they’re planning to set them up all over the country as the numbers grow.’

‘Do you know what happened to all the other women who were in Wales?’ I asked.

A silence descended on the group.

‘Some of them were murdered’ said Judy. ‘I met a couple of the people who there with us, they told me all about it. Remember the people who left before us? Well, some of them got stopped on the way back to, well wherever they had come from and...’

‘Then are we really safe here?’ I asked.

A chorus of ‘yeses’ came back.

‘There’s no way. There are too many of us and anyway, Maxine organised a, well a security force.’

‘But what about if you leave here, I mean you know, go into Oban or whatever the nearest town is?’

‘Not advised, at least not on your own.’

‘Jesus, so nothing’s really changed then.’

‘Not out there,’ gestured one of the women, ‘but here, we’re safe.’

‘But don’t you want go out, I mean visit? This is just as much a prison as the place in Wales was. The only difference is we don’t have the police guarding us.’

‘So what’s the alternative?’

‘I don’t know.’ I responded. ‘All I do know is I don’t want to bring my daughter up behind bars even if it is a rundown stately home.’

‘We all feel the same you know but what choice do we have? The men,’ Diane spat, ‘out there, hate us. They want us all dead, especially our daughters. And at least we don’t have to deal with the government as well.’

‘So what changed then? How come the government have, well changed their tune?’

‘Public pressure and women did it. And it’s happening all over the place, not just in the UK. We’ve finally become a force to be reckoned with.’

There was a chorus of agreement with Diane’s view. I suddenly felt old and completely out of it. Was my ‘old’ self reasserting itself? Did this happen to anyone else who had gone through the ‘change’ I wondered? Looking around me, I was struck by the fact that I was surrounded by really young people, I mean it seemed as if most of the men who had gone through the change were young to start with. To be honest, I felt extremely depressed. Was it being here? I have to admit that I really didn’t want to leave Mrs Fanshawe’s comfortable retreat from the world, so perhaps that was it.

‘Nova? You okay?’

I turned to face Judy who had sat down next to me looking concerned.

‘Yes I’m fine’ (I lied, not too convincingly), ‘I was just was thinking that’s all.’

‘You look really down, are you sure you’re okay?’

I nodded distractedly and looked around for Valentina but couldn’t see her. In an effort to shake the feeling, I suggested to Judy that maybe we should go and see Maxine.

‘She’s not here apparently.’

‘Oh...’

‘Look, why don’t we take a walk?’ she suggested.

‘Yes, okay but first let me find Valentina.’

‘She’ll be fine. She’s over there with Rebecca and some of the girls from Wales. We can tell them on our way out.’

The girls were deep in discussion or whatever it was they got up to so we left them to it. We picked up some warm coats and headed for the grounds. We threaded our way through the vehicles outside the entrance then wound our way through the ‘encampment’ that circled the main building. The ‘park’ was huge. How they could protect it all was a beyond me. We left the noise of the people, the tents and campers behind us and entered a wilderness. Beyond, through the trees with their autumn leaves, a high brick wall could just be made out. On the other side of the copse of trees there was what at one time must have been an ornamental lake but much it was now silted up or covered in algae and lilies. On the other side of the lake, sat a gazebo, or at least the remains of one.

‘Let’s go there,’ Judy offered.

We made our way round the edge of the lake and finally arrived at the gazebo. The roof was largely intact but the sides, there were six, were in the last stages of decomposition. Inside, up a couple of steps, there was a wooden bench running around the perimeter and after clearing away some debris, we sat at the back facing the lake. We sat there in silence for awhile, the only sound being birds and occasional plop of something in the water.

‘It must have been beautiful here at one time.’

‘Yes,’ I offered.

‘So Nova, what’s the problem?’

‘I don’t really know, it’s just that...well, I suppose, I just feel completely run down, exhausted, not physically. I just want to go back to living an ordinary life, with Valentina. You know, I don’t know her at all, not really. She’s growing up before my eyes. It’s all too bizarre.’

‘Well perhaps you need to get more involved with the other mothers? After all, they’re all going through the same thing. Frankly, I think you have yet to come to terms with becoming a woman and a mother.’

‘You don’t think I’ve accepted it?’

‘Have you forgotten what you were like when you first came to stay with me?’

‘No I haven’t. But back then, I was virtually the only one.’

‘And I think you think you still are. What are you afraid of Nova? Becoming a girl? After all, you still dress like a man. It comes across as if you’re afraid of showing your...’

‘My femininity?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not sure what that is.’

‘Well perhaps it’s time you found out.’

‘Perhaps you’re right but how?’

‘Just accept the fact that you’re a woman and a mother. After all, when it comes to Valentina, you couldn’t be more maternal.’

‘Well obviously, I mean she’s my daughter for Christ’s sake! I’d do anything for her, you know that.’

‘Yes of course you will. I’m not questioning that. It’s how you relate to yourself that I’m worried about. Look, we’re the best of friends aren’t we?’

‘Yes of course we are. You’ve been there for me right through everything.’

‘Well trust me Nova. Look, I don’t know anything about your life from before except that you were married and that you have no kids. You never talk about your past life.’

‘There’s not much to tell really.’

‘Well I can’t believe that.’

‘Look, I had a job I really didn’t like too much. I had pretences to a life as an artist that didn’t work out. I had a marriage that was pretty much a fake, more a marriage of convenience really that finally ground to a halt. I had a few friends that I shared my love of music with. Okay, much earlier, I’d been quite active politically but well that died along with everything else progressive when, well with the New World Order. I pretty much retreated into my own world and then all this happened.’

‘You didn’t have a girlfriend before?’

‘Well, off and on, but I could never really find anyone that I wanted to share my life with. Look, if it hadn’t been for the change and me meeting Victoria, we’d have never met. It’s all serendipity isn’t it.’

‘And now?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, a partner?’

‘A partner? You mean a man?’

‘Well not necessarily.’

‘I can’t see myself with a man, knowing them the way I do. And in any case, what kind of man would want to have a relationship with a mutant?’

‘You’d be surprised.’

We both laughed and it broke the ice.

‘That’s the first time you’ve laughed in a long time Nova.’

I felt embarrassed but I knew she was right. I hadn’t really come to terms with becoming a woman. What did I think of myself now? Was I really afraid of displaying my ‘femininity’? I wasn’t even sure what it was?

Then she said,

‘Do you enjoy being a woman?’

I didn’t know how to answer her question.

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘That’s not an answer Nova. You’re being evasive again.’

‘To be honest, I feel like I’m two people. There’s what I appear to be and there’s me inside. I mean when people see me, they don’t see someone who has been transformed by who knows what process, so they relate to me on the basis of all their past experience.

‘Remember Janet, poor Janet? She went overboard, so maybe that’s what she wanted to be all along, a girlie girl, or maybe she thought it would make her more acceptable, more ‘normal’, not that it helped her finally. I do remember feeling very uncomfortable around her, embarrassed even.’

‘Perhaps you were jealous or resentful of how she had embraced her new self?’

‘Perhaps you’re right, but wearing frilly dresses and platform shoes doesn’t make one, me, a woman does it? She became what she thought men wanted.’

‘Maybe she actually enjoyed dressing that way?’

‘Yes, you could be right, not that we’ll ever know.’

‘No but surely your reaction to her then was very much a male reaction, almost a ‘politically correct’ one. The one thing you never faced and I contend that you still haven’t, is the fact that no matter how you think about yourself or how you want other people to see you, you are a woman, and a mother. After all, you don’t have any problem with being a mother do you?’

‘No, no I don’t.’

‘Then why separate the two?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well it’s as if you separate being a mother from being a woman.’

‘Well in a way, it’s true isn’t it? After all, I didn’t have sex with a man. In fact, aside from the doctor at the hospital, I haven’t had any kind of a relationship with man at all. I’m not sure I know how to deal with a man.’

‘Deal?’

‘Well okay, relate to one.’

‘And if he didn’t know you’d been through the change, what then? Would you tell him?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Why?’

‘Well that should be pretty obvious shouldn’t it?’

‘That he’d reject you or not judge you for what you are?’

‘What am I Judy?’

‘Isn’t it for you to decide? If he assumes you’re just a ‘normal’ woman, then in all likelihood he’ll relate to you as one.’

‘What, like open doors for me? Chat me up? In any case, what’s a normal woman?’

‘Well you’re quite attractive you know even if you do try to hide it.’

‘Do I?’

‘Oh come off it Nova! You never wear a dress or anything that shows off your assets. You bought really nice shoes that I’ve never seen you wear. Well once you did.’

‘So I’m in denial then?’

‘I should say so!’

‘Does it really matter though that I don’t dress the way men expect women to dress?’

‘But you know something Nova? You don’t come across as butch, no matter that you dress like a schlump. There’s no way you can hide what you are. And in any case, you’re assuming that women wear nice clothes just for men.’

‘Don’t they?’

‘Ah the vanity of men.’

‘So now I’m a man.’

‘Well I think that you’re desperately clinging to your past instead of dealing with what you are. And I must say that I have great difficulty in relating to you as a woman because you resist it so.’

‘Does it upset you?’

‘Yes, sometimes it does and it’s frustrating because it means I can never really relax with you.’

‘Oh.’

‘Isn’t this what it’s all about, the so-called battle of the sexes. Women are in part what men have made them and at the same time are totally apart, forced to discover for themselves what it is to be a woman. The two of course, can never be separated, that’s the dilemma of our age isn’t it.’

‘It’s that Gaaia thing again.’

‘Gaaia?’

‘Yes, the female spirit that the planet is imbued with. The Earth Mother.’

‘Is that what you think you are? Some kind of avenging angel?’

‘Perhaps. After all, consider the timing.’

‘Isn’t it a bit mystical for you?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. On the other hand it needn’t be considered as mystical, merely evolution. And considering what a mess men have made of things, we couldn’t have come along at a better time could we.’

‘It still maybe too late to save us.’

‘Possibly. Well yes, it maybe too late to save rapacious capitalism, industrial so-called civilisation, but I won’t miss it.’

‘Nova, I’m surprised.’

‘Surprised? What that I prefer a simple life? Not really. I’m still a socialist, even if not a very good one. My needs are few. I’m not ambitious, I don’t really care about things, at least not junk. I have all I need...’

‘Except peace.’

‘Yes, except peace. Well, and justice too.’

We sat in silence for awhile just soaking up the surroundings.

‘You’re not mad at me are you Judy?’

‘Mad? Why should I be mad at you? No, I just thought we needed to talk that’s all.’

Finally, after what seemed an age, I said, ‘I suppose we should head back.’

‘Yes’ Judy said with a sigh. We got up, reluctantly and embraced.

‘We don’t have to go back now you know,’ Judy offered. ‘We could explore more of the estate?’

Then I saw movement amongst the trees on the opposite of the lake, over the way we'd come.

'There's someone coming.'

The figure emerged from the trees and even from this distance, it was obviously Maxine, her tall, gangly body unmistakable. The figure waved indicating that she was coming our way, so we sat down and waited.

She finally arrived, carrying a bag and somewhat out of breath,

'So this is where you're hiding out.' Gesturing, 'So what do you think of my ancestral pile?'

'Impressive' I said.

'Yes, well it's obviously seen better days.'

She opened the bag she was carrying and got out some plastic sandwich bags and bottled water.

'I've brought some lunch, thought you might be hungry.'

'Thank you. How did you know we were here?'

'Well it's the obvious spot to head for if you want some privacy.' And as an afterthought, 'You don't mind me being here do you?'

'No, it's fine. In fact, we'd been looking for you earlier but they told us you were, somewhere...'

'Yes, there's so much to do. It's a bit of a madhouse as you've no doubt noticed.'

We sat in silence, munching on the sandwiches. Eventually, Maxine said

'So did you sleep well? I hope the room is comfortable enough for you all. It's not much I know but...'

'No it's fine really.'

More munching.

Then she said, 'Your daughter Valentina is a wonder. You must be a very proud mother.'

'Yes, she is quite amazing. We left her with all her friends from Wales.'

'Yes, well she's the oldest you know so that makes her somewhat special.'

'Special?'

'Well yes, I mean she's looked up to by all the other girls.'

'She is?'

'You didn't know? Well I suppose you wouldn't would you. I mean...'

She trailed off, somewhat embarrassed by her comment and we sat there in an awkward silence. Finally, Maxine said,

‘Look, I’m sorry, we seem to have gotten off to a bad start.’

‘No, no. Look we’ve just gotten here and it’s all a bit overwhelming. We have a lot of catching up to do.’

Judy saved the day by intervening.

‘So Maxine, perhaps you could bring us up-to-date? We’re curious about well...a lot of things really.’

Sensing that she’d been rescued, she said,

‘Well yes, it’s all rather weird in a way. I’ve been active in the Women’s Institute for years. Do you know much about the WI?’

We both shook our heads.

‘Well it has a proud history of progressive work that goes back for decades. Most people think of flower arranging but there was a time when it was very active in politics and the conditions of women in the workplace and so on. Well anyway,’ She paused to take a slug of bottled water, ‘When it became clear that a pogrom was underway, I decided that we women had to act so I proposed that the WI take the lead. That’s it really. The rest, this place, refuge if you like, just happened. I mean it wasn’t planned, I just was fortunate to have inherited the place but I’d never actually lived here, so the place was, is, falling apart, but we got loads of volunteers to make most of it weatherproof, though there’s still a lot of work to do, especially as we are getting new arrivals every day, and now a lot from abroad, although if they’re from outside the EU, they’re running into all kinds of problems, but then what else is new eh.’

‘What happens to them if they’re turned away?’ Judy asked.

‘I dread to think. But the Home Office is having a lot of trouble denying them entry. We have a permanent picket outside the Home Office, all or at least mostly women. It’s difficult to for the government to justify denying entry, especially as it had already come a real cropper over Wales. You were lucky to get out when you did believe me.’

‘In any case,’ Maxine continued, ‘When the scale of murders and the government’s complicity, or at least neglect became public, there was an enormous outcry. To tell the truth, I think what did it was when normal women with babies or children started to be killed, no doubt mistaken for evolved women.’

‘I often wondered about that,’ I said. ‘After all, how do you tell the difference?’

‘You don’t do you. But what it’s revealed is the deeply misogynous culture we live in, much deeper than most realised. All you girls have done, is brought it all to the surface.’

‘A war of the sexes.’

‘Well yes, at least that’s how it manifests itself but underneath, it’s all about power isn’t it.’

‘So where to from here?’ I said.

‘Frankly, I haven’t a clue but at least you’ll be safe here. I know it’s not ideal, and in the long term, being cooped up here is not a solution but, well what else can we do?’

‘What about the government?’ asked Judy.

‘What about it?’

‘Well we do constitute more than half the population.’

‘Yes well, that has occurred to us.’

‘Us?’ I said.

‘Well the WI and other organisations that have been talking about contesting the next election but...’

‘But what?’

‘There are disagreements.’

‘Like whether or not to form a Women’s party?’

‘Yes, something like that. After all, we’d need a platform that extends beyond...’

‘Us?’

‘Yes. Basically, we’re afraid that it would polarise the population completely.’

‘Do you think it would?’

‘Yes, I’m pretty certain it would. But on the other hand, something has to be done.’

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