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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 17

‘And these things did sing the Muses, nine daughters begotten of Zeus:

‘Verily, at first Chaos came to be,
and next the wide-bosomed Gaea...
And dim Tartarus, in the depths of wide-pathed Earth,
and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods ...
From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Nyx,
And of Nyx were born Acher and Hemera.’

We walked back to the main house pretty much in silence, well we didn't continue the conversation we'd had at the lake. There was a lot to think about. Too much to think about. Back at the house, I tracked down Valentina, or rather she found me and we spent the rest of the afternoon being shown around by her and her friends, with Valentina making a point of keeping Rebecca by her side and whose hand she would not let go of. She was so happy to be back with the 'gurls' she gushed over everything, the place, all the new things to see and do. Every new person we met, she proudly introduced me to as the mother of the first of the new 'gurls', grinning at me and standing close by me. But all the while my mind was in a turmoil thinking about the conversation we'd had with Maxine. Was it realistic to think about contesting an election based upon defending women? Like Maxine, I was dubious about the idea, could it really lead to a real war between the sexes? The whole scenario was just too far-fetched. Yet, it seemed that the 'change' would continue regardless. It just wasn't logical to foresee the endless extermination of women and their children, yet since when were people logical especially under such stressful conditions? I also felt more than a little guilty about not being more involved, for here was an opportunity to put my politics into practice. Instead, I had fled and hidden out in the wilds. God, what a mess! And on top of all this, Judy had forced me to think about my own, personal politics. Who the hell was I? What was I? In the middle of thinking about these seemingly intractable problems, a voice intruded.

‘Nova? Do you have a minute? Can I have a word with you?’

I turned to find a young woman clutching a baby girl, hers I assumed.

‘Yes of course.’

‘I'm Sarah,’ and she offered her hand.

‘Hi Sarah, pleased to meet you. And who is this?’

‘This is Venus,’ the little girl smiled shyly at me and turned to her mother and snuggled up close to her hiding her face.

‘Hi Venus.’

‘She’s a little shy. We wondered if you’d like to come to an informal meeting we’ve put together?’

‘We?’

‘Yes, that is, the new mothers here. We thought that maybe you’d be able to, well offer some advice, share your experiences with us.’

‘Well I’m not sure I have any advice to offer but I’d love to come and meet with you. When is it?’

‘This evening, in the library, about 7?’

‘Okay, I’ll see you then.’

The four of us grabbed a bite to eat and then on an impulse,

‘Valentina, want to explore the park with me?’

‘Yes please! Can we?’

‘Judy? Rebecca?’

So the four of us set out into the park and figuring that the ‘gurls’ would like the lake we retraced our steps. The gurls were of course delighted. Here was a whole new world to explore and they both pestered us with questions about the lake. Then Judy, sensing that I wanted to spend some time alone with Valentina went off with Rebecca to explore around the lake edge, leaving us at the gazebo. We sat in the gazebo for awhile, just watching the lake and saying nothing then out of the blue, Valentina said,

‘Mama, are you happy here?’

‘Do you mean here in Scotland?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well I feel a lot safer here and I’m happy that you’re back with your friends from Wales.’

‘Oh.’ Silence, then, ‘But are *you* happy?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well...’ She seemed unsure of what to say.

‘Valentina, do you understand why you’re different?’

‘Oh yes and I know you were once a man. And I know you nearly died.’

Silence.

‘Mama, what were like before?’

‘When I was man you mean?’

She nodded.

‘Well, pretty ordinary really and I was, that is, I looked much older.’

‘Are you glad you changed?’

‘I’ve been asking that question myself and yes I am because I have you.’

‘Is that the only reason?’

‘Well it’s the main reason, but there are I suppose, other reasons as well, like I’ve got a healthy body again.’

She looked at me dubiously and said,

‘Is that all?’

‘Well Valentina, it’s not an easy question for me to answer. So much has happened over the past eighteen months that I’ve not really had the time to think about such things.

Why do you ask me?’

‘Mama, I love you.’

‘I love you too sweetheart.’

‘I don’t know lots of things like you do and I’ve never really been with ordinary girls and...I’m not sure what I am.’

‘Not sure? What do you mean sweetheart?’

‘Well some of the girls, their mothers have, had, wives and ordinary children and well...’ she trailed off, unsure what to say next.

I’d never thought about married men who went through the change, don’t ask me why. What happened to them? Did they get divorced? What about any kids they had? They obviously weren’t with them here in Scotland, or were they?

‘Are there any ordinary children here Valentina?’

She shook her head, ‘No Mama but some of the mothers talk about their other children and how different they are.’

‘Does this bother you, that they’re different?’

‘I’m not sure. Does being different mean that I’m worse than they are?’

‘Worse? How do you mean worse?’

‘Well some of the gurls say that their other brothers and sisters say we’re freaks?’

‘Do you know what freak means?’

‘Yes, that we’re not made right.’

‘Do you believe you’re not made right?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘What do all your friends think? Do they think that you’re not made right?’

‘Well why do they try to kill us?’

‘Because they’re afraid.’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘You, because they don’t understand you or how you came to be. They think you’re a threat.’

‘Threat?’

‘Well it’s really only men who think you’re a threat and sometimes they get their children to think the same way.’

‘But that’s not truthful.’

‘No it isn’t.’

She mulled over the exchange and looked at me as if imploring me to give her an answer that made sense and of course, none of it made sense. In this, she was just like any other child when confronted with something completely irrational; confused and afraid. I hugged her to me, trying to reassure her and we sat in the ruined gazebo watching a pale watery orange sun sink behind the trees.

Later, back at the house, I asked Judy if Rebecca had talked about the same issues and it seemed that she’d had an almost identical conversation.

‘Perhaps they decided to sound us out,’ I said.

‘It seems that way doesn’t it. And it would be in keeping.’

‘Yes, they do behave like a tribe don’t they.’

Judy laughed. ‘Well what choice do they have? It’s them against the world isn’t it.’

‘Well there’s us too you know.’

‘Yes but it’s not the same really is it. And after all, we have no idea how they really think or what they’ll be like when they grow up. We don’t even know when they’ll grow up.’

‘Did Rebecca ask you about the mothers who had children from their previous life?’

‘Yes she did.’

And?’

‘Well, I couldn’t really tell her much could I.’

‘You know Judy, the real problem I have is in knowing who I’m really talking to. Is she just a really bright little girl, you know, some kind of child prodigy, except of course they’re all child prodigies, or is there something else...?’

‘Something else? Like what?’

‘Well that’s the problem isn’t it, I’ve got no idea. I do my best to treat her like, well, a little girl, my daughter and not to make her feel like a...’

‘A freak?’

‘Yes I suppose so.’

‘You’ve read too much science fiction.’

‘Yes, I’m still haunted by the Midwich Cuckoos.’

‘Still?’

‘Yes, back in the early days, I raised the idea with the doctor in the hospital, I mean just as a joke really but the feeling has never completely gone away.’

‘You don’t seriously believe it do you?’

‘No of course not!’

‘But?’

‘Well look, I mean they’re not out to take over the world are they. They might be extremely bright and have developed at an incredible rate but you know as well as I do that they don’t even lose their tempers or exhibit any kind of strange behaviour. They’re generous, good natured, sharing, normal even. Most parents would die to have such children.’

‘Yes...’

There were maybe fifty or so women along with their children present. The tables had been moved to the side and the chairs rearranged in a circle around a central space. Diane, the woman who had invited me sat in the middle along with three other women, and she beckoned to me to join them but I declined and instead sat in the front row. After a few minutes the meeting was opened by Diane who introduced herself and the women with her and proceeded to talk a bit about her background, how old her child was and so forth. Then a single page was handed out to everyone present that consisted of a short list of discussion points followed by a short summation of the current situation in the country and around the world. It seemed judging by the questions and comments that most of the women present were, like me, mostly concerned about the future, their safety and that of their children. Not surprisingly, virtually all agreed that although they felt safe in Oban, all wanted to return to their homes and live a normal life and raise their children. Eventually, Diane after introducing me asked me if I’d like to say a few words.

‘Well frankly, I feel the same way as most of the people here. The fact that I was the first, well at least the first to survive here in the UK is neither here nor there. I’m thankful that unlike others, I and my daughter survived. The question is, I think, for how long do we stay here? And what of the future? I can’t speak for anyone else but I’m desperate to get to know my daughter, for her to go to school, to mix with other children, ordinary children. I don’t want her to grow up as some kind of, well, freak of nature.’

‘Yes,’ interrupted someone, ‘But what chance do we have of doing that?’

‘I’m not sure. Right now it would seem the odds are against us. But surely the present situation can’t last forever?’

‘Not as long as men run things!’ someone shouted out.

‘So are you saying that women should run things?’

‘Why not? Look at the mess men have made of the world!’

‘But is that practical?’

‘Whose side are you on?’ shouted another woman.

‘It’s not a question of sides.’

‘Well what is it then? Men run things and as long they continue to murder us and our children...’

‘And encourage it.’ Someone else shouted out.

‘So what’s your solution then?’ I replied.

‘We need to organise politically, we need a women’s party.’

‘Only women? What about the men who don’t fear us? What about those men who support us? If we did as you want, surely it would widen the split between men and women, is that what you want? You forget that we are a tiny percentage of the population and even if most women support us, they have husbands, sons, fathers...’

‘So what’s your solution then?’

‘Well right now I don’t have one. I’d rather we debated the issues and try to figure out a way forward. I can’t pretend it’s easy but starting a war between the sexes hardly seems to be a solution.’

Arguments broke out around the room. Eventually Diane called for order.

‘Quiet please! Quiet!!’ She paused, looking around the room. ‘Look we are all under a lot of pressure here and arguing amongst ourselves does no good at all.’

I was suddenly aware of a small hand gripping mine. It was Valentina who stared up at me with a very worried look on her face.

‘It’s okay darling,’ I said.

‘We never argue Mama.’

‘Yes, I’ve noticed. But how do you resolve differences then?’

‘Well we talk things over and well, arrive at a solution, if there is one.’

‘And is there one for this problem?’

‘Oh yes Mama.’ Most emphatically.

‘There is?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well perhaps you need to tell us what it is.’

‘Well, I’m just a little girl, the adults won’t listen to us.’

I never could tell whether or not she was being sarcastic. Was she capable of sarcasm?

‘Well how do you know sweetheart until you try? I’m listening to you. I’d like to know what your solution is.’

‘Well it’s simple really, we just need to change the government.’

‘Oh is that all?’

‘You see, you’re not taking us seriously.’

‘Well I agree, we do need to change the government, not only because, well because of us but because there are lots of other problems to solve.’

‘Yes Mama, that’s what we think too.’

‘The problem is dearest, that it’s not so simple to change an entire system.’

‘Yes but most women want to change it.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Well, you see, we’ve been doing some research and...’

‘Research?’

‘Yes, and if we could organise enough women plus some men, we could win an election.’

‘So you think the idea of Women’s party is a good idea?’

‘Oh no, that wouldn’t work. But we do need a new political party.’

‘Could we have some order please!’ Diane’s voice rang out.

I put my hand up.

‘Yes Nova?’

‘Well, I think we should listen to what our daughters have to say on the subject.’

The response from the mothers revealed that not everyone present felt that their little girls had anything useful to offer.

‘If I could continue?’

‘Yes go on Nova.’

‘Well it’s just dawned on me that well, we don’t all feel the same way about our delightful children. What I mean is, perhaps some of us refuse to accept that they are very special, different in ways that some of us find hard to accept or perhaps even understand. Even I have a problem acknowledging that my daughter, who is the oldest one here I think, could have anything useful to say on the subject. Old habits die hard as they say. I’d like ask you to listen to what my daughter has to say, is that agreeable?’

There were cries both for and against the idea. Eventually Diane called for a vote on the issue. The ayes won by a very small margin. Valentina looked very unsure and kept looking to me for encouragement.

‘Go on darling.’ She insisted however that I hold her hand whilst she spoke and you have to admit it looked very strange, a small girl standing up and addressing an audience of adults whilst their daughters looked on. As I waited for Valentina to begin, all the girls gathered together, as if for encouragement.

‘Well,’ in her small, high voice, ‘we,’ she turned to all the other girls, ‘we think that we have to change the government and...and, the only way to do it is to vote out the existing one and we think that if we all get together that it can be done. It’s not just about us, it’s, well it’s everything. We are, well we think we are, a sign.’

All the girls nodded in unison. Someone shouted out in a dubious tone,

‘What kind of sign?’

‘We believe in Gaea. We believe Gaea, well Gaea sent us.’

‘And who or what is Gaea dear?’ Someone in a very condescending tone asked.

‘Gaea is the Earth Mother,’ answered Valentina.

Snorts of derision and cries on ‘nonsense’ and ‘rubbish’, but sprinkled amongst the put downs I heard voices of support too.

‘So you’ve been sent as you put it but to do what? How can a handful of little girls change the world?’ Diane asked, apparently taking Valentina’s assertion very seriously.

Valentina looked unsure of how to respond and stood silently and even a little coy as she thought about it, smoothing down her dress and shuffling from one foot to the other and then looking up at me as if seeking support.

‘Perhaps, if I may intervene here?’ I asked.

‘Gaea is a generally accepted theory that views the Earth as a single, self-regulating organism with life as the regulator, controlling the oxygen and carbon dioxide cycles which in turn controls the weather, the climate, well everything, maintaining an ecological balance.’

‘And humans have upset the balance so ‘Gaea’ has decided to intervene to save the planet?’ someone shouted out.

‘Well I’m not sure it’s a conscious process, it might just be evolution.’

‘It’s pretty far-fetched don’t you think?’

‘What Gaea or the girls?’

‘Well both. You’re saying that the Earth is a thinking being.’

‘Well that’s one way of looking at it but it’s not the only interpretation.’

‘What about God?’ someone yelled out.

‘God?’ What about God?’

I could see the debate rapidly getting out of hand.

‘Look, I don’t think it’s useful to start debating God or even if Gaea is real, I mean in the sense that Gaea thinks. What is important is that most scientists now accept the idea that the Earth is a single, interactive process that has evolved over billions of years and that the actions of man have upset a delicate balance that threatens the future of the Earth, at least the Earth that we’ve inherited.’

‘Mama?’

Valentina’s tiny but insistent voice pierced the noise forcing a silence on the gathering.

‘What darling?’

‘Well we know.’

‘Know? Know what, that Gaea is real?’

‘Unless things really change, we’ll all die.’

‘How do you know this Valentina?’

She shrugged, not sure how to answer. Finally, she said,

‘Well, we’ve talked and...’

‘We?’

‘Us, the gurls, and why else are we here?’

‘Are you saying that well, Gaea sent you?’

Valentina shrugged every inch a little girl but then she nodded.

‘This is ridiculous!’ shouted one of the mothers, followed by shouts of agreement and dissension. A woman at the back asked to speak.

‘Valentina may not know how to explain what she knows or perhaps she’s just intimidated by so much animosity, but she does have a point. We all know that there’s no let up in the rate of change. There are hundreds of thousands of us all over the planet, maybe

millions for all I know, and if it continues at the same rate, well, the old order is doomed isn't it. The question is, will we listen to her, them? And we all know how the men think, at least those in power. It's not just about letting us and our daughters survive, it's about what kind of world we want to live in. As you say, who cares if Gaea is real or not, what we do know is that we're running out of time. Unless we listen to them, and come up with some kind of solution, she's right, we'll all die.'

Arguments broke out all over the place. Valentina burst into tears and I held on to her for dear life, trying to soothe her. The rest of the girls ran to their respective mothers who gathered them up protectively. Some left the room, others gathered into knots of like-minded thinking.

'It's alright sweetheart, everybody's very frightened and don't know what to do. You did very well, I'm very proud of you.'

'Please,' Diane tried to bring the meeting to order.

'Please, can we all just calm down, you're frightening the children and we're not being very productive.'

I liked Diane, she was very down-to-earth and had an authoritative presence that people listened to. It occurred to me that this surely couldn't be the first time such meetings had taken place? What has been going on? Perhaps I didn't appreciate just how traumatic events had been, wrapped up in my own and Valentina's survival. But deep down, I knew Valentina was right but how to prove it? I knew too, that it wasn't just about our survival but about the complete transformation of the way we lived as a species. Not something we could tackle alone, the idea was ludicrous! I didn't want to admit it but I knew that it meant overthrowing the existing political and economic order, in short, revolution and a global one at that. And the more I thought about what Valentina had said, the more sense it made. At the same time, such ideas sounded utopian and utterly unrealistic. The idea that a bunch of women and their daughters could change the world! The whole thing was ridiculous. I looked around me at the fifty or so women gathered here of whom maybe half would even consider the idea seriously. A political party? Revolution? What kind? And what about the men? God, it gave me a headache just thinking about it.

'Nova?'

It was Diane, standing next to me.

'I think it's time to call a halt to this don't you? Could we talk, not now but maybe later?'

'Yes, I was just thinking about it and what a nightmare it is and the girls.'

Then Judy came over with a very frightened Rebecca clinging to her.

‘Well...’ she said.

I didn’t know what to say. Judy broke the ice.

‘Diane? Is this the first one of these meetings you’ve held?’

‘Oh no, there have been several and they’ve all ended pretty much in the same way.

The women are scared and who can blame them. Maybe it’s too soon. Maybe we have to let the girls grow up first? And after all, they come from all kinds of backgrounds, aside from the change and the kids, they have virtually nothing in common.’

I’d never thought about that aspect of it. Stupidly, I’d assumed we all thought alike.

‘Where’s your daughter?’ I asked.

‘She, she died, well that is she was murdered.’

‘Oh I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise.’

‘That’s okay.’

But I could see that it was far from okay. I shivered at the thought of losing Valentina and tried to imagine what Diane had been through. It was hard to conceive when you considered that she’d had to survive the change, pregnancy, birth and then the fear and hatred of men. To go through all that and then lose your child?

‘So where to from here?’ I asked.

‘Have you spoken to Maxine yet?’

‘Well briefly, about the political party idea.’

‘And?’

‘I don’t know, I really don’t know. I’ve been out of things for such a long time, I don’t have any idea what’s really going on.’

‘But are you interested?’

‘I’m, I’m not sure. Frankly, all I want is to raise my daughter but I also realise that may not be possible without some kind of fundamental change taking place.’

Valentina had fallen asleep in a chair.

‘Look I need to get Valentina to bed, could we continue this tomorrow?’

‘Yes of course, I’m sorry.’

‘No it’s okay, there’s nothing to apologise for. And there’s a lot to think about.’

‘Yes, I understand.’

On the way back to our room I asked Judy what she thought.

‘Well I feel like you really. It’s an awfully big commitment isn’t it and there’s Valentina.’

‘Would you?’ I asked.

‘Would I get involved, politically you mean? Well, it all depends on Rebecca and whether I can keep her.’

‘I’m sure we can sort that out. After all, her mother’s family didn’t want to know did they?’

‘No but they might change their minds.’

‘You think so? I doubt it. And in any case, it’s a whole new ballgame here.’

‘Yes you’re probably right.’

‘But assuming you can, I mean keep her?’

‘You know what it would mean don’t you?’

‘Oh yes, it’s not the sort of thing you can do in your spare time, start up a political party.’

‘I get the feeling that’s what you want to do.’

‘Who me? Are you kidding!’

‘But you’re thinking about it aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know.’