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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

Chapter 19

Chapter Nineteen

“...we have the certainty that matter remains eternally the same in all its transformations, that none of its attributes can ever be lost, and therefore, also, that with the same iron necessity that it will exterminate on the earth its highest creation, the thinking mind, it must somewhere else and at another time again produce it”.

Frederick Engels, from the introduction to ‘The Dialectics of Nature’, 1883.

It’s as if I’m reborn. No really, that’s how I feel. No, let me rephrase that, as usual I’m being much too impulsive. But it’s as though I’ve been living inside a shell all this time, and I’ve just broken out of it. Valentina was the first to comment. Well she didn’t exactly comment, but she sensed the change in me and we just got closer to each other. I realized that in spite of all my protestations of love and caring – although real in my mind – they had not translated into actions, at least that’s how I saw it. It just goes to show how one can delude one’s self even when going through a process of ‘self-evaluation’. Meanwhile, events in the world seemed to be in some kind of synchronicity with my own changes or maybe now I am just more receptive to them? In any case whatever the reason, I started to find all kinds of information about fertility including the fact that it seemed that Valentina would be fertile when she reached puberty but frustratingly I couldn’t find any information on when she would reach it or whether she could reproduce parthogenetically. As to my own fertility and means of reproduction the information was still thin on the ground. It seemed that most of us were reluctant to find out, or if we could be, or we weren’t telling. That got me to thinking just how many of us had just disappeared into the general population by finding a man and getting married (or just hooking up with one) without telling anyone? How does one keep such a thing secret especially from your partner? The sociologists must be having a field day. One thing is obvious, the emergence of us ‘gurls’ is slowly but surely going to transform social relations and as Judy pointed out to me the other day, there are entirely new kinds of relationships emerging that are mixes of the new and the old. Is this where it’s headed and if so, what will its impact be on society? Perhaps it will be this that has a bigger effect on society than any traditional political process? After all, unless we are no more than a ‘one off’

genetic freak, there can be no doubt than within a few generations, there will be no more men! Perhaps the impact of this possible future is just too much to bear? Just what are the men in power today thinking? Will the world now in the making be so different? I like to think it will be, that women are genuinely superior to men in all the important ways, that at long last, the worst aspects of our genetic inheritance, of our 'animal' past, have been shed or is this merely wishful thinking on my part?

It's March and we are in the middle of a freakish warm spell here on the West coast of Scotland, so we (Valentina, Judy and Rebecca) have decided to go on a picnic and for the first time since we arrived here, we've left the estate and headed for the sea (after recharging the car's battery). This part of Scotland gets 'kissed' by the Gulf Stream, so incongruously given how far north we are, there are palm trees in Oban but it's still really warm for the time of year, 22°C and the onshore breeze is glorious, it's almost warm enough to swim but none of us has brought a bathing suit. This is the first time Valentina and Rebecca have been to the ocean and so much water has them absolutely fascinated. The landscape is wonderful with crags and castles, islands and lochs. After lunch, we left the car and did a bit of exploring and for a while life seemed almost normal and I wondered if it would be possible to find a place around here that we could move into to? Surely it would be safe or was I just hoping? I raised the idea with Judy and the girls immediately caught on and whooped with joy.

'But wouldn't you miss all your friends' I asked.

'Oh Mama, let's a find place, please Mama!' Valentina pleaded with Rebecca joining the chorus.

'We can still visit can't we?' she added.

'Well of course you can.'

Judy was all for it and we had the money. All in all it sounded idyllic.

'So why don't we check out an estate agent and see what's available?' Judy added.

'What now?'

'Yes, why not now.'

'Yes, why not.' I said but adding, 'Maybe we should ask Maxine first, she's sure to have a good idea of the situation here.'

'Yes but that doesn't stop us from looking and frankly I'm fed up with the isolation of the estate and I'm pretty sure you are as well.'

‘Yes, just the thought of getting our own place and forgetting all this other stuff for awhile is very tempting. But what about your house?’

‘You know, I’d forgotten all about the cottage but it’s not a problem, I’ll get in touch with Victoria and ask her to check on it and maybe make some inquiries about selling it or maybe renting it out. Moving my stuff up here is not a big deal. Nova, we need to try and start living a normal life for Christ’s sake!’

‘Yes you’re right. Okay, let’s do it.’

The girls were ecstatic and chattered away about what kind of room they wanted and would it have a garden and a million other questions and demands. The two were inseparable, more like real sisters really. I can’t describe how happy I felt that afternoon as if it was the real beginning of a new life and perhaps in a way, it was or was it just yet more wishful thinking on my part?

Amazingly , everything worked out the way we wanted it to. It took a couple of months what with sorting out the finances, Judy’s house and my old apartment and getting moved. Only Maxine was dubious and tried to talk us out of it, I suspect for entirely selfish reasons. Should I describe the house? Well it was more of an overgrown cottage really, constructed of local granite, on the way to Dunstaffnage Castle about three miles north of Oban and very near the sea with a large and rambling, that is overgrown garden, four decent sized bedrooms and smaller room that could also be used as a bedroom, a large living room and a large, well equipped kitchen plus what used to be called a study that Judy immediately commandeered. It even had central heating and a rather luxurious bathroom (plus a smaller, more modest one on the ground floor and not the best location). There were also a couple of rather ramshackle buildings at the back of the garden that might be worth converting into additional accommodation or perhaps workspace at some future time.

When we approached a local estate agent about buying a house the process was entirely ordinary. No strange looks or questions, nothing. We were just two single parent mothers looking to buy a house to share although I suspect that the size of our down payment had a lot to do with our extremely positive reception. Strangely, although it was the first time in my life that money was not a problem, I didn’t even think about it. In fact, since moving to the estate, we’d had little need for money and the royalties from the book had been piling up

(something else I'd forgotten all about). And although there were lots of changes we wanted to make to the place we decided to wait until – well we decided to wait before doing anything drastic.

We slipped out of the estate without any fanfare only saying goodbye to a few people we'd gotten quite close to. Maxine was quite cool toward us and I felt a little guilty and promised that once we'd settled in to the new house we'd come and visit and of course she was more than welcome to visit us to which she made some kind of noncommittal reply. Judy was much more brutal, not to her but in her comments to me, viewing Maxine as some kind of dogmatic politico who was more concerned with the 'revolution' than with people and I suppose she's right. Frankly, all I could think about was Valentina, was it my feelings of guilt? Whatever it was I didn't really care anymore, all I wanted to do was build a 'normal' life for my daughter. Judy, ever the practical person raised something I'd not even thought about namely education. I pointed out that legally, Valentina and Rebecca were still way below school age and in any case, did we want to send them to a regular school? Yet another issue to confront but not now. The problem of course was that the girls had the appearance of perhaps eight year-olds, not only in height but in behavior even though Valentina was not even three yet. And what use would a normal school be to her? She was way ahead of any normal child, more like a child prodigy really and I had no intention of sending Valentina to some 'special' school, and in any case, there was nothing local available.

The problem was taken out of our hands however when a couple of weeks after we'd moved in there was a knock at the door and I was confronted with two women from the local education authority who wanted to know why Valentina and Rebecca hadn't registered for school.

'News travels fast,' I said.

'Excuse me?' one of the women responded, obviously unaware of who (or what) we were. Then Judy joined me splashed with paint and holding a paint roller followed by the two girls who had even more paint on them.

'You'd better come in,' I answered and we led them through to the kitchen.

'Excuse the mess but we've just moved in.'

We cleared some chairs and sat around the crowded kitchen table. I looked at Judy for guidance but she gave me a surreptitious look as if to say 'let's play it by ear'.

'Now what's this all about?' I asked. 'Our children are much too young to start school.'

‘Young?’ responded the same woman who had spoken at the door, with a disbelieving look.

‘Yes, my daughter is not even three yet and Rebecca is even younger.’

Then it sank in and they looked rather embarrassed.

‘Oh I see.’

Silence.

‘Do you?’ said Judy.

‘Well we assumed...’

‘What I’d like to know is how you knew? After all, we’ve only just moved here.’

No response. And then in an effort to recover the initiative, the other woman said,

‘Well perhaps you’d like to register them with a pre-school group?’

‘I’m not sure that would be useful right now but we do recognize that the issue of education for our children will have to be dealt with at some time, but I’m sure you understand the, well rather unique circumstances of our situation.’

‘Well yes of course...’

More embarrassed silence and shuffling of papers as the two women exchanged glances. Finally, Judy said,

‘Would you like some tea? And perhaps meet the girls?’

‘Well, uh, yes that’s kind of you.’

Judy got up and put the kettle on and I called the girls over, who had been standing by the door looking on.

‘This is Valentina and this is Rebecca.’

The two girls acknowledged the presence of the women but nothing more, looking very wary and exchanging glances with us.

‘You’ll have to forgive us,’ I said ‘but you must understand that we have not exactly had an easy time of things.’

‘No, no, of course, we had no idea really. It’s normal whenever anybody with school age children move into the district for us to make contact.’

‘Joined up government?’ proffered Judy.

‘Well something like that. Were you staying at the estate?’

‘Yes but we, well we just want to live as normal a life as possible if we can that is and we love it here so we decided to buy a place and try and get on with raising our children. We

know their education is bound to become an issue but as legally they're below school age, we assumed...' I responded.

'Yes, yes of course. As I said, we really had no idea. I realise after all you've been through that you're understandably dubious, but we're really not, that is, the local authority is really not 'checking up' (she mimed a double quote) on you.' And smiled reassuring. 'And this really is a unique situation,' she added.

We sat around, sipped tea and exchanged 'pleasantries' about Oban, our new house, had we visited the sites and so on and so forth. By now the girls were more at ease and they joined us at the table, talking in undertones to each other. In an effort to be normal, the two women introduced themselves to the girls and exchanged 'pleasantries' with them as well to which the girls responded politely but guardedly. Then, after what I suppose was a 'polite' period of time, the women made their apologies once more and got up.

'Well thank you for the tea and we really are sorry for the misunderstanding.'

Misunderstanding? I thought.

'Look,' Judy asked 'We'd really appreciate if you would be, well 'diplomatic' about our presence here? We just want to get on with our lives and raise our children in as normal a situation as is possible under the circumstances. I'm sure you must understand.'

'Of course, yes well...' and as afterthought offered, 'But if there's anything we can help with please get in touch. I understand that it can't be easy for you and we really are here to help...' as they got up and moved toward the door smiling at the girls but somehow managing to convey the impression that the girls had some kind of really infectious disease.

After they'd left, Judy said,

'I really got the impression that they were afraid of the girls.'

'Yes me too.'

'Do you really think they'll keep quiet about us?'

'Not a chance!' offered Judy. 'It'll be all over Oban in no time, you wait and see the next time we go to the shops.'

'Will we have to move again?' said Valentina looking really down and coming to stand next to me.

'No darling, we're not moving, not again. This is our home and this is where we're staying!' I said rather louder than I'd intended to but already, just like Valentina, I was also

thinking the same thing but somehow, I knew that this time, I would fight to stay put and from the look on Judy's face she felt the same way.

Well Judy was wrong about everybody in Oban knowing who we were, or if they did know they weren't letting on. We'd opened an account with a hardware store as we were buying all kinds of stuff for the house, paint, tools and so forth and whenever one of us paid a visit, they were extremely friendly even to one young man flirting with me until he saw me with Valentina at which point he looked decidedly disappointed as if I was now off limits. When I told Judy about it she asked me if I was disappointed and I admit that I was flattered by the attention but perhaps more so by the fact that it made me feel normal for the first time since the change, what was it, over three years ago now?

And life entered a decidedly normal phase with most of our time spent on getting the house set up and for the first time in a long while I had my music and my rather expensive sound system. Thank goodness we were fairly isolated as my Bose speakers packed a punch when I wound up the volume. Valentina was absolutely fascinated to discover this side of me and in no time was as avid a listener to my music as I was. And to my delight, I discovered that she had the same or at least similar tastes in music and we spent a lot of time together trawling through my extensive collection much to the annoyance of Judy, who thought I should be spending more time helping her do up the place. Life was sweet! But how long would it last? In a strange kind of way, the sheer normalcy of it was difficult to get used to, I continually expected a knock on the door or a phone call telling us that we had better move.

The other major change was that I started to spend more time on my appearance even to getting my hair cut and styled and buying something more adventurous than my usual slacks or jeans and trainers especially as it was now summer and Oban was in the middle of a heat wave, so trips to the ocean became a daily event requiring a swim suit. It's difficult to explain all the feelings I went through during this period but you have to understand that just being normal was for me a completely new experience. Thank God for Judy as she helped me through all the strange feelings I experienced during this time. Perhaps the best way to describe it is to imagine that I'd suffered some kind of total amnesia and was re-discovering

myself, what it was to be me as if for the very first time. A lot of it really ‘stupid’ stuff like the way men treated you in public, the way they looked at you, checking you out from tip to toe as if measuring you against some kind of yardstick that they carried around in their heads. I suppose when you’re born female you grow up in an ‘ocean’ of these experiences and so it’s mostly subliminal or perhaps it’s simply ignored like water off a duck’s back? But it’s not like being a transsexual, I didn’t have to work at being a woman or at least what men thought a woman should be. I was comfortable with my body now, at long last it belonged to me, it was me.

But the most important change was with the girls, who after a time started to behave in a more relaxed manner and even started making friends with youngsters they met when we went to the beach or explored the town and the surrounding sites. The other change was that their growth seemed to be slowing down, as if they’d hit some kind of ‘plateau’ that in a way was a real relief as I worried about whether or not their rapid growth would be noticed. In other ways, they were decidedly normal little girls. They loved dressing up and doing all the predictable ‘girlie’ things normal girls did, although whether this was innate or learnt given TV and all the normal girls they saw and mixed with, is impossible to say. Where they were really different was in the sheer volume of knowledge they’d acquired and I had to caution Valentina that when she hung out with other girls not to let on how much knowledge she possessed to which she responded,

‘Oh Mama, we’re not stupid you know. We know we have to be careful. We know how to be ‘girls’ and anyway, it’s lots of fun just being ‘girls’.’

They both giggled and nudged each other like ‘oh adults don’t know anything’. I should have guessed of course but it took a weight of my mind to know that they could take care of themselves even down to the creation of a quite sophisticated masquerade or perhaps it wasn’t such a masquerade after all? Left to their own devices, would they have been that different? I suspect not, for like all children it’s their purity and innocence and total lack of guilt, at least until we adults mess them up. What made the ‘gurls’ different I suppose was the intensity of their innocence. They were impervious to our ways in spite of everything they had experienced. Who knew what they’d be like when they grew up? Perhaps, or was it just wishful thinking on my part? they’d never grow up at least not the way we knew it. Whatever changes had taken place it was something fundamental in the way they thought and felt that

made me feel inadequate somehow. I would often just watch them playing or doing something and they had a surety and a grace that was truly mesmerizing. If this was the future then we had nothing to worry about.

The house meanwhile was pretty well the way we wanted it and most importantly, Judy had her own space to work in and was able to get back to what she wanted to do which was write and she would disappear into her small study for days, coming out only for food or to spend time with Rebecca. She wouldn't tell me what she was working on. I on the other hand became the proverbial house-mother, taking care of the girls, cooking and cleaning, listening to my music with the girls and loving every second of it, immersing myself in the normalcy of it all. The issue of the world and the future faded into the background. Of course I knew it couldn't last, sooner or later that other world of incipient chaos would intrude once more but until then I was determined to make the most of my freedom to live a normal life if only for a brief moment.