

CASCADE

by Jane Smith

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I tried to make sense of what she was saying. I trudged along the leaf-sodden path, one foot after another.

I swallowed to keep my voice from wavering. ‘So you’re leaving me?’

‘Silly,’ Helen said. ‘It’s not *you* that I’m leaving.’

I churned this over as I plodded.

‘It’s not as if I *want* to go,’ she said.

She marched ahead of me, her stride broad-hipped and steady. A streak of damp ran down the back of her t-shirt. She stopped and turned back, and my eyes welled. I pressed my lips together and looked past her to the path beyond.

‘You don’t *have* to go,’ I said. ‘It’s *your* choice.’

Helen sighed and turned away again, and we hiked on in silence. The path snaked downhill under a dense canopy, and tree roots and rocks made treacherous our progress. I focused on my shoes. Invisible creatures rustled at the feet of the gum trees on either side of the path. Lizards, I hoped, not snakes. But it was impossible to tell. Then the sky began to show itself again and great granite boulders emerged. Heat shimmered above them but the rushing and bubbling of water lightened the air.

We clamoured across the rocks. Helen stopped, panting, and dropped her towel and water bottle onto the ground. Her face was pink and shining.

‘Here?’ she asked, and I nodded and dropped my towel beside hers.

I brushed away the flies that were buzzing around my head. The pool ahead was a perfect mirror. We watched it together, marvelling silently at the upside-down rocks and trees and sky resting on its surface. The stillness was unbearably sweet.

'I'm going in,' I said. I kicked off my joggers, whipped off my t-shirt, shorts and hat, adjusted my bikinis and padded to the water's edge.

Helen dawdled on the rock, fussed with her towel, swigged from her water bottle. The first touch of icy water on my hot skin took my breath away. I paddled, gradually easing in up to my knees, my thighs, my hips. By the time the water had gripped my waist, my legs were numb. I dove under, and its chilly fingers stroked my scalp. Glorious! The freshness, the chill, the weightlessness. The oblivion beneath.

Emerging, I tipped my face to the sun. Alone in the wilderness, with only the hidden goannas and birds and insects for company ... and Helen. At last, she came to the edge, sat on a rock and dangled her feet into the pool. I turned away.

'Freezing!' she shouted.

I turned onto my back and kicked, propelling myself lazily across to the far side. The sky was a perfect blue bowl, fringed with gums. I tipped my head back and obliterated the sounds of the world.

Helen and I had spent a weekend camping together every year since our children had been old enough to leave with our respective husbands. For twenty years we'd gone through this ritual. This would be our last.

'This will be our last,' I accused, turning back onto my belly and breast-stroking towards her.

'I'm not *dying*,' she said. 'I'll come back for visits.'

‘You won’t.’

Helen sighed again and I sulked in silence. One of us had to do something to break the tension, but that was *her* job. She pushed herself off from the rock and slid into the pool. She disappeared under the water, making concentric ripples fan out. Then her head, dark and slick like a seal’s, broke the surface again. I looked upon her bare face, its every line highlighted by the sun’s unflattering light. I tried to see her as a stranger might: without love. Middle-aged, like me: lightly wrinkled, soft around the middle and flabby in the arms. Grey roots showing.

‘Freezing!’ she said again.

‘It’s not that bad.’ I didn’t want to agree with her, though my whole body was tingling with the cold. Then I softened: ‘Not when you get used to it.’

We swam for a while. We didn’t talk much. I breast-stroked to the edge, struggled across the metre or so of slime, slipped, and splashed inelegantly back into the pool. I laughed before I could stop myself. I scrambled on all fours onto the expanse of baking granite. Helen followed me out.

‘I’ll miss this,’ she said. ‘I *will*, you know. I just don’t have much choice.’

‘I *know*,’ I said. ‘You *told* me.’ She *had* told me, more than once, in fact: her husband’s parents were old and sick and there was, apparently, no one else in Auckland capable of looking after them. ‘And you’re such a bloody perfect human that you’ll happily turn your whole life upside down to help. Even to the point of leaving the frickin’ country.’

‘You’d do the same.’

I wouldn’t. *I* knew that, but there was no point in saying so to Helen. She was a better person than I in so many ways. No wonder she had no qualms about leaving me.

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. ‘Walk up stream?’

I went on without waiting for her reply. She followed me anyway. We picked our way across the rocks to the place where water tumbled into the pool. I hopped from rock to rock to a flat ledge that the water raced shallowly across before cascading down to the level below, and gingerly eased myself into a sitting position in the water's path. Helen, less nimbly than I, lumbered through the stream until she was seated by my side. Water bubbled around us.

'I hope there are no leeches,' she said.

'Remember that time I had to pull a leech out of your bum?'

Helen laughed. 'How could I forget?'

'No one knows you as well as I do.'

'In some ways.'

I swivelled around to narrow my eyes at her. 'What do you mean "in *some* ways"?''

'Well, you don't know *everything* about me.'

'I reckon I do.'

'Hm.'

'What? What do you mean "Hm"? What *don't* I know?'

'Oh, just ... no one knows *everything* about another person. Everyone has secrets.'

I didn't. Not from Helen. 'OK then, tell me something I don't know about you.'

Helen laughed. 'Don't be stupid.'

'*What* secrets?'

Helen shrugged. 'OK, you've got me. I have none.'

'Let's go,' I said, standing shakily. 'I bet there *are* leeches in here.'

I knew that would get her out of the water. We made our way carefully back across the rocks to our towels and clothes, while I silently fumed. *What secrets?*

Ours was one of only three tents in the campsite. The isolation was unsettling and wonderful. It felt dislocated, surreal. There were sounds all about, but none of them were human. Lizards rummaged in undergrowth, birds warbled in a dozen different voices, flies buzzed. Far off, water bubbled. We showered under an ice-cold tap, and changed into track pants and light jumpers as the sun faded. We poured wine and drank it sitting in camping chairs while we slapped at mosquitoes and read books. Mine was a murder mystery, Helen's a work of philosophy. We cooked pasta on a gas cooker and mixed it with a jar of sauce and cheese, while a wallaby and her joey lingered at the edge of the clearing. By the time we'd cleaned up, darkness had descended. We had tea and chocolate by torchlight.

Then Helen crawled into her sleeping bag, and I trudged alone to the amenities block. It wasn't far, but darkness turned the trek into an odyssey. Rustlings on the path turned out, in my torchlight, to be cane toads that startled me out of my skin. Bats hurtled past only metres from my head. The facilities were unlit and unfriendly; doors creaked, secret dangers lurked in the toilet pits. I did my business quickly and scurried back to camp. Helen was already drowsy when I stumbled into the tent and wriggled into my sleeping bag. I said goodnight and she mumbled a reply. *What secrets?*

I plummeted quickly into sleep. When I awoke, the darkness was complete. I sensed that I was alone and reached for my torch. I snapped it on, and saw in its sickly light that Helen's mattress was empty, her sleeping bag discarded like a shed snakeskin. The tent flap was unzipped. Where was she? I turned off my torch and lay wide-eyed in my cocoon. Helen must have gone to the toilets; of course she had. I lay and waited for her return.

Bats flapped overhead. They gave me the creeps. An owl hooted, or at least I thought it was an owl. Where was Helen? And what *secrets* did she have? I heard the distant *whump-whump* of a helicopter. Then there was another: *whump-whump, whump-whump*. What was going on? I waited, and I heard it again. The isolation was getting on my nerves. I was reminded of a book I'd read once – one of my son's – in which kids returned from a camping trip only to find their country had been invaded by enemy forces. There it was again: *whump-whump*. Ridiculous, but it churned my stomach with fear. When those kids had returned to civilisation, they'd found their whole world was different. When I got home, mine would be too.

It's nothing, I told myself. It's a military training exercise, or CareFlight or something. Where was Helen? Where the hell was she?

I'd always been the one to do the leaving. When I was young, I'd travelled. For years I'd roamed, restless and itching for adventure. But in the end I'd come home, found a husband and a best friend, and inadvertently dug myself in. I'd grown roots. What now? Now everything was wrong: upside-down, like the reflections in the pool. Now I was in a world where I was afraid of helicopters that whumped in the night, and people left me, and best friends had secrets.

After what seemed like a decade, Helen fumbled her way back into the tent, zipping up after herself and rustling her sleeping bag. I pretended to be asleep. Pretty soon, I was.

We hiked again next day: a long trek through the sultry bush to another waterfall. My legs wobbled on the descent. *What secrets?* I silently asked Helen's sweaty back.

There were signs of a disturbance ahead. Twigs were broken, undergrowth trampled.

'Wait!' I cried. 'Is that blood?'

We stopped to inspect the red stain. Just metres from the path, the trunk of a ghost gum was smeared with a streak of rust, as if a bleeding limb had brushed past it. We followed a trail of dark stains and crushed vegetation. Helen wanted to return to the path. She was uneasy about

losing her way, she said. I insisted we carry on. She said she was hot and wanted a break, so we sat on a fallen log and drank from our water bottles. A smell that had been faint when we'd been on the move intensified now that we were still. It was foul and rotten and smelt like death.

'What are your secrets, then?' I asked her, aching. 'And where did you go last night?'

'What are you talking about?' Helen turned her dark, beautiful, reprovng eyes to me.

'I woke up and you were gone.'

She smiled and turned away. I watched her beloved profile and felt my heart breaking. I wanted to suspect her of absurd things. I wanted to imagine she'd been up to no good. Meeting a lover in the bush. Sacrificing a wallaby in a black magic ritual. Murdering a lost backpacker. Collaborating with invaders. I wished she was a serial killer so I could hate her.

'Toilet, that's all,' she said, as if I was an idiot. Which, of course, I was. 'God, that stink is disgusting.'

We got up, brushed the leaf litter off our shorts and wandered further along the trail of destruction. The stench deepened. By the time we found the pig's corpse, we were lifting the hems of our t-shirts to cover our noses, exposing our pale stretch-marked bellies. The pig was long dead and swarming with flies.

Helen's raised brows asked me if I was satisfied, and I nodded, and we turned away from the beast and retreated to the path. We walked quickly downhill, hurrying to wash the stink from our nostrils with the fresh waterfall air. It was a long way down.

We got to the bottom, where the bush opened up and revealed a sheer cliff. A tower of water was hurtling down the cliff face into a rockpool. We stood in awe, sprayed by the fall's mist.

'I wish you wouldn't be angry,' Helen yelled above the thundering water. 'I *have* to go; I really don't have a choice. It's *family*.'

‘It’s Michael’s family, not yours,’ I shouted.

Helen huffed as if that didn’t deserve a response. I supposed she was right. Then she changed her mind, giving me another chance. ‘They *are* my family,’ she yelled.

‘And what about me?’

‘You’re not—’ she stopped herself, but not *quite* in time.

Not family. Just a friend. Just. The waterfall pounded in my ears.

‘It’s not a competition,’ she said. But it felt like a competition – one I’d already lost.

There was nothing more to say.

‘I’m going in,’ I said. I wasn’t wearing togs, but the water was a magnet. I stripped off to my underwear and plunged into the pool. Who cared if anyone saw? The waterfall thundered into the rockpool, its fury magnificent. I swam, buffeted and deafened by its spray. Helen stood at the edge and watched. I couldn’t see her expression, couldn’t read her at all, didn’t want to.

I thought about my husband and kids, all busy in their city lives, and I missed them sorely. My kids would leave one day too. It’s natural for your children to grow up and leave. But they’d always be in orbit around you; always *yours*. This severance was different. I had no claims on Helen – none.

Friendship, love: how could such a strong bond be so fragile? I didn’t want to unravel or understand it. I didn’t want to know how far that bond would stretch. I trod water, bobbing in the churning, chilling, life-giving water. I let the cascade pound upon my skull. I might have cried, but I can’t be sure. If I turned away from Helen and faced the falls, I could imagine myself alone in the bush – in the universe. It wasn’t such a bad feeling. The waterfall was vigorous, the rocks shining and ancient. I lay on my back and let the turbulence drive me away from the fall, to the centre of the pool, where the thrumming of the torrent dulled to a distant hum, and the ripples

rocked me playfully, and there was nothing – *nothing* – in my view but sky and rock and tree and water. This picture had been unchanged – would be unchanged – for eternity.

I flipped over and ducked below, away from Helen, away from everything, and was enveloped by silence. I thought: this, right now, is everything. The sky, the water, the land. This. Just this. And, oddly, for that brief moment, it was enough.

Cascade won second prize in the Ethel Webb Bundell Award for Short Stories in 2022.

Judge's report: <https://www.swwofwa.com.au/ewb-story-judge-report.html>

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