

NO PAPERBARK TEARS

Peter Jackson

It started out of nothing. She had a stall at the Sunday morning markets on the foreshore. “I don’t have any men’s stuff,” she said, then checked me with, “Unless you look good in a dress.”

We laughed

The next Sunday, and the one after that, I was back. I admitted to myself it was her I kept returning for and asked her for coffee.

“That would be lovely,” she said.

I wanted to go immediately, but she scoffed at me, “I’m working.” I felt foolish, too eager. We agreed upon a time and place.

Returning to the bay, we met, took our coffee and sat under the beach almonds. We started talking and it was easy between us. Like butterflies, we danced over and between subjects.

We flitted over histories of relating: parents, siblings, school friends, bosses. We fluttered close to, but never quite alighted on, ex-partners and money. We took long sips at the flowers of our similarities and correspondences. Soon we were in synchronous agreement. The colourful wings of our best selves beat in time, hovered in smiling connection.

“Come for a walk with me,” she said.

We walked up the main road, the beach behind us, until she showed me a sign, hidden in the undergrowth. We turned away from the road and stepped along a sandy track that wove between shrubs and trees. She walked us down to a timber deck under a massive tree with peeling bark.

The deck became a board walk, crossing a lagoon. To one side the lagoon rippled with the touches of dragonflies. Along the further bank, green reeds hid a honking bird

The other side of the board walk was a garden of trees on a lawn of sunshine-bright water.

“Paperbarks,” she said, “They call them Weeping Paperbarks.”

I nodded, entranced. From mounds of mud the thin trees rose, each crowned in long leaves hanging in the vibrant, golden sunshine.

“They don’t look sad,” I said.

“No,” she said, and, sliding her hand into mine, led me along the grey streaked boards.

We walked across the water, past some houses and turned back into the forest, upstream from the board walk. The soft damp earth was thick with paperbark trees.

Leaves crunched underfoot. Sea breezes whispered in the swaying leaves far above us. We said less and less, only a quiet word to draw each other’s attention to another wonder. More smiles. Our fingers laced together like vines in a tree’s limbs. Our hands released and the vines entwined our bodies and hugged close. Like the sunshine on the leaves in the crowns above our heads, we kissed.

We were together then.

She had her routines, and I had mine. We had our own rhythm, like the tides, predictable, yet never the same. We would yield and conform, like the wavering palm fronds to the wind. We were solid, like rocks of granite. In the time that was ours, we fit together like the shore fits the sea.

She was always waiting for me in her little cottage, like a possum in its hidden den. Happy to see me and full of questions. She followed up whatever we’d last spoken of, keen to know what I wanted next. She sniffed me over like a puppy does when you first return, licking and wriggling for a caress. I loved it, and like a puppy, I rolled onto my back and adored her.

There was always the sea. We lost ourselves in waves of joy. We plunged down beneath the diurnal banal and into breathless moments of connection. We floated in the fluid caress of lovemaking. The pulsing sensuality conflated the physical with every other perception. It swept us, like a cresting wave, into something that felt beyond either of us.

In the swell and return of all this she did not push against the current. She floated with my enthusiasms and desires. Like the broken lines of leaf and shell that mark the high tide line, she rose and fell without resisting.

I came to feel like there was an impasse between us. We were like two granite boulders pushed tight together, each one holding the other back. There was no moving forward.

The earth turned, the seasons turned, our relationship turned.

The rain would not fall, and the earth was thirsty. The creek beds were dry sand with no hint of dampness. The sunshine that once seemed a benison, now beat the parched leaves until they hung, dull and exhausted, like panting runners at race end. Dead leaves crackled underfoot, as though angry with their deprivation. There was an ache in the hills, a pining for relief.

It was broken by the fights. It was all clear skies and sunshine on the surface, but inside the pressure was building. It seemed that her thoughts and feelings swirled in tighter and tighter circles, looped in on themselves through the day.

Then, in the evening, it poured out. A torrent of words, furious and intense, swept all before it. Small twigs of past slights were embedded in the walls of my ignorance. I was thrashed with the boughs of her belligerence, drowned in her pelting scorn and anger.

She talked herself to speechlessness. I responded into the quiet and she blasted me from another direction. The fury, the verbal thrashing. The precipitate haste in which her feelings tumbled the pointed, hurtful words out.

Finally, she was done. I sat in the wreckage of my crushed self-respect and watched her subside. She came back to herself. The calm followed the storm.

There was no diving into the sensual to salve and heal. It was a raw wound, only bandaged with soft words and gentle embrace. Acknowledgement and commitment might splint the jagged hurts and pointed truths, but the core was fractured.

Doubts and guilt ate at me for days. Each remembered infraction, be it disrespect or tease or scorn, came back to me. Little things. Nothing of themselves, like an ant bite – but I was not the one being bitten.

I was not innocent in all this. There were times when I was full of bluster, like a howling wind biting on a winter's day. I railed and whined about some frustration. She sat there, hugged herself, arms wrapped tight across her belly.

Later she soothed me. She never deserved my squalls. I was undeserving of her patient appeasement, like little waves lapping on the shore.

Today is market day. She is working and I skulk along the beach. I am uncomfortable in my skin, as though I need to shed my skin and grow. To my surprise I am back at the boardwalk over the lagoon, where we came that first day. This time, all the paperbarks in the lagoon look dead. They have no leaves and are like ghostly fingers pointing at the sky. The promise and beauty of that first day has disappeared, only the bones remain.

Like a scrub fowl I go scratching the claws of my memory into who we are and what we were. I grub over the bickering past. I scabble at the words, raking and ripping into each encounter, scouring off the laughter from past joy. The hard sharp beak of my self-righteousness pounces onto every wriggling weakness. But there is no point to this – chewing over her faults doesn't nourish me.

I sense a small insight. Which of my skittering crawlers am I hiding from view as I toss the detritus behind me? I am not innocent in this.

I feel a hard dark flaw, like a rusted steel picket, in my chest. It's like the scene in front of me. Something fertile and living has suffered and now appears dead to the core. I thought it was her. I thought it was us. It is something inside me, hidden from myself.

I decide to tell her it is ended. It will not be comfortable, but I can do it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It is her. The message says: *It's over. I am away 4 a week, and wen come bck don't want to see you eva again.*

The sticky oppression of the past few months lifts, washed away with the news. My heart leaps, as though stripping off its clothes and running through the first warm rain of the Wet season. The fat drops of relief, the soaking cleansing of release.

We are done.