



# What the darkness should

Chris Womersley

**W**hen I was about five years old, still entangled in childhood, my mother fell pregnant. All through the autumn she swelled, until by winter she was as big as a house and the shape of a capital B. My father laughed his toothy laugh when he touched her belly and told me she must have swallowed a pumpkin seed. My mother just batted his hands away and smiled. At night she pulled me close and let me listen to her smooth, rounded belly. It sounded like outer space and I imagined my brother adrift upon its vast emptiness, hanging on grimly until the time when he would land in our family. I waited long and hard for my little brother.

My new brother would sleep in my room. Lying in bed at night I conjured his still-unborn face from the darkness and held lengthy conversations with him. I imagined the things we would be able to do as soon as he was ready. We would play games and go on secret adventures in the bush with a compass and map, the way I had done with my father. I would show him where witchety grubs lived and the best way to build a cubby house. There would be an entire lifetime of things to do together.

When he was finally born, I discovered his name was Martin. He was small and wrinkled. He cried a lot and snuffled in his sleep. I lugged him from room to room. We watched my mother pulling rhubarb and herbs from her sunny garden.

When he was about two, Martin learned to say my name.

Peter, he shrieked. Peter. Later, I took him down to the creek at the edge of our small property with our dog Bailey. We crouched in the grass to see the bunyip that drank there late in the afternoons. We tried to catch a frog but Bailey scared him away. I showed Martin the birds and we squatted on the ground to watch the bull ants going about their business. His childish breath scattered the dry dirt and caused the ants to stop what they were doing and wave their antennae around angrily in the air like fists. He loved apples and pears. He loved the sound when I blew a raspberry.

Because I spent so much time with him, I was often the only one who could understand Martin's babble. My parents would call me in to translate.

'Peter. What's Martin saying?' they would ask.

'He's saying that we saw a bunyip down at the creek.'

'Oh, really. That's lucky, sweetheart. Not everyone sees a bunyip, you know. What was he doing?'

'He said the bunyip was drinking some water.'

'Was he a big bunyip?'

'No. He said it was just usual size.'

'Oh, I see. Well, you be careful down there. Don't go in the water.'

'Yeah. We know.'

'Are you ready for dinner? Hush Bailey. Outside!'

'Yeah. We're ready. But Martin says he wants ice-cream.'

'I see.'

When he was four, my brother disappeared while we were at the market with my mother buying vegetables. He had been holding my hand and just slipped away in the crowd. We searched everywhere. Nobody knew where he was for three days. I imagined him tramping through the bush on his stumpy legs, humming one of the songs I'd taught him, naming the trees in his burbling voice as he went, saying *Hello dragonflies, Hello kookaburra, how are you?* The police searched everywhere but he was probably in that muddy drain the whole time, where that man had stuffed him.

They put Martin into a box and lowered him into a grave a few days later. A family of cockatoos screeched in a nearby tree. The soil was hard and crumbly and I worried how he would breathe. I thought perhaps that we should put some fruit in the grave or else he might get hungry, but no one paid me any attention.

Nobody talked much about Martin after that. Nobody really talked about anything. For a while at school the kids and teachers stayed away. My parents said it wasn't my fault. My father used to say we lost him, as if that was the problem, but I think finding him in that drain with no clothes on was worse.

'He was Wednesday's child,' my mother said. And she went to her room and climbed into bed, where she stayed for a long time. She said she wouldn't come out again until they caught the sick bastard that did those things to Martin. My father just stood on the verandah

and rolled cigarettes, one after another, until there was a pile of them unsmoked at his feet. My parents were like remote planets and I waited in the kitchen for them to return to my orbit. Sometimes at night I heard whimpering in the yard but it was just a piece of tin from the shed flapping in the hot, dark wind.

I was in grade five. We learned about bushfires and the names of all the oceans: Pacific, Atlantic, Southern. I had never seen an ocean. It seemed impossible to me for so much water to be in the same place at the same time. The creek at the bottom of our property only ran in spring. In summer it was just a ditch of blackberry.

One day during a dry lunchtime, some kids were talking about the old Norton place on the edge of town. Samantha Riley said a witch lived there and most of the other kids said so too.

'Yeah. She comes around the town at night, when everyone is asleep.'

'My mum says that's not true.'

'It is true.'

'How do you know?'

'Because my brother saw her.'

'He can't, stupid. Only dogs can see her. That's why they bark at night for no reason. When they see her.'

'She has a snake with a tongue made of flames.'

'Blue flames.'

'Yeah.'

'She smokes a pipe.'

'She's black.'

'Yeah. An Abo.'

'And eats herbs and things.'

'Yeah.'

We were near the wooden shelter shed, beneath the shade of the huge old gum tree that swayed like a grandparent. The schoolyard smelled of eucalypt, dust and orange peel. George Langton was handballing a footy up and down in the air. It was far too hot to play anything, even cricket. Cicadas droned.

Then Samantha Riley brushed her damp, blonde hair out of her eyes and leaned in close. She had a smear of Vegemite on her lower lip. 'You know what else?' she asked in a whisper.

'What?'

'She makes babies out there.'

'She does not.'

'She *does*.'

'Yes. She does.'

'How, smarty-pants?'

'She makes the mummy drink tea—'

'Penny tea.'

'That's right. Pennyroll Tea. The mummy waits there for a while then the witch plants something in the garden out the back of her place and babies grow there.'

'Like bulbs.'

'She plants baby bulbs.'

'Yeah. It's obvious, really.'

'Yeah. Obvious. You just go out there and pick yours.'

'Sometimes it takes a whole day.'

'She knows all sorts of things.'

I imagined a tree of babies, each dangling at the end of a spindly limb, mewling, waiting to be plucked by anxious parents-to-be. I imagined Martin's scrunched-up face, the way he jammed his tiny fist against his wet mouth when he was newly born. I thought of my mother, still under her covers, and my father on the verandah, each waiting, it seemed, for Martin to return and barely able to move until he did so.

The bell rang for the end of lunch and as I was running inside the idea came to me fully formed, like an egg.

The old Norton place was at the end of Chinaman's Track according to Samantha Riley, who seemed to know everything about the witch except her name. You followed the river for a bit and it was just there. A few hour's walk. 'You can't tell anyone, but my sister went there last year,' she told me. 'But she didn't find any she liked, so she just came back empty. Now she has to stay at home on weekends.'

One Saturday afternoon I packed a bag with fruit and water and took some money from the flour tin. I told my mother and father I was going to visit my friend Simon who lived down the road. They just nodded and off I went. I wanted to explain where I was going, but thought it would be better to surprise them.

It was hot and there was smoke in the air from a fire at Ginger Gully. *Hot as buggery*, my father would have said. The air thrummed with insects and heat. I could hear Mr Sutton clearing his land with a chainsaw. I followed Chinaman's Track past the abandoned mine shafts and up the hill. The bushland was different here. Around our place it was green, especially with my mother's vegie patch and the willow trees around the creek. I had never been this far by myself before. It was another country. The trees were twisted as if straining to break out of the stony ground. My shoe dug into my right heel and I could already feel a blister forming. Other trees scratched my legs. What if a bushfire came through here? They said you sometimes didn't even know until it was too late. Dingoes just ran right through the flames and out the other side, trees exploded.

When I got to the top of the hill I had sweat running all down my face and I couldn't even see the river yet. I was already tired. There were just more trees and a bruise of dark smoke on the horizon. That trembling heat. A bull ant bit me on the knee and it felt like someone had stuck a red-hot pin into my flesh. I wanted to cry. Tears pressed against the inside of my face until they leaked out through my eyes. I sat on a stump and wept. This was a stupid idea. There was no way I would ever get to the dumb witch's place. Maybe Samantha Riley was wrong, after all? The world was much larger than I thought. It

seemed to go on forever, utterly without end. This was a really stupid idea.

Who knows how long I cried for? It seemed a long time but when I was done with my tears, or they were done with me, I drank some water and ate an apple and felt a bit better. The rest of the bush was silent. Even the flies were asleep for once. Then I heard a strange, high-pitched sound. On the ground nearby was a baby bird. It had no feathers and I could see dark veins beneath its papery skin. It opened and closed its beak and scratched in the dry dust.

I leaned down until I was so close I could see the creature's heart fluttering beneath its skin. I wasn't sure if the bird could see me through its milky eyes but it squeaked louder and moved its head around in a circle. Already ants were clambering over its pink and trembling body, shooting in and out of its mouth, right across its eyes, deciding which bits to eat first. Soon the little creature would vanish entirely beneath the black swarm and that would be that. The thought of it made me itchy. Curious and appalled, I watched the little bird squirm in the dirt. I wondered what it could be thinking.

'What's that you've found there?'

Still on my hands and knees, I spun around in the dirt to see a man standing behind me. He was tall and he wore a hat. I didn't say anything and after a few seconds he leaned down with his hands on his knees. 'Ah,' he said. 'A baby bird!' Then the man looked at me with a serious face. 'What shall we do?'

I wasn't sure if I should be afraid. I shrugged and the man crouched down on one knee to peer at the bird. He was older than my dad, with wrinkles. He smelled of cigarettes and soap. The side of his neck was red from being outside a lot and sweat ran down his face. 'A kookaburra,' he said. 'Perhaps fallen from the nest. That happens sometimes. Nature can be cruel.'

It was late afternoon by this stage and I guessed it would be dark in an hour or so. A burnt leaf landed on my shoulder and when I picked it up, it crumbled in my fist.

'Are you out here by yourself?' the man asked.

I nodded.

'Do your parents know?'

I didn't say anything.

He looked at me for a long time and seemed to give all this some thought. 'It isn't really very safe out here today,' he said. 'There's bushfire warnings, you know.'

Still I said nothing, just fiddled in the dirt with a stick. My face was hot and dry. There was a red mark on my knee where the bull ant had bitten me. I felt a long way from anywhere. I wondered if my parents had even noticed I was gone.

'So, what are you doing out here in the bush by yourself, on a sweltering day like this?' the man asked.

I fumbled in my bag, grabbed my bottle and drank some water. I didn't want to tell this stranger anything. I felt foolish. I didn't even know what sweltering meant. It

would soon be night and nobody knew where I was. Not even I knew where I was.

'I'm sure you weren't looking for abandoned birds,' he said.

'Will it be okay? The bird?'

The tall stranger leaned down to inspect the creature. 'I don't know. He doesn't look too good. I had a cockatoo once I found on the ground just like this one. Took her home and she grew up big and strong. Used to live out the back on a perch I built for her. Called her Fred.'

'But that's a boy's name.'

'Yeah. But I thought at first she was a boy and couldn't think of a better name.'

'What happened to her?'

'Oh, she hung around for about three years, then went off with a flock. Used to come back every once in a while but I haven't seen her in a few years.'

'Don't you miss her?'

He shrugged. 'Yes. Sometimes, but she was awfully loud and cranky. Things change. I miss what might have been, more than what was, but I have plenty of other animals. I have enough to do.'

'What do you do?' I asked.

The stranger tipped his hat back on his head to scratch his forehead, then looked at me closely. He had very blue eyes. 'You're Martin's brother, aren't you? Peter?'

Martin. That word. I nodded because that was all I could do. Hair fell over my eyes. I couldn't speak for a long time and we just sat there among the crackling trees. Then it all came out in a rush. I said I was going to get another baby for my mum and dad, a new brother for me, about the witch, about the tree of babies and how I got lost, and how the bull ant bit me on the knee, look at the red bump there now.

He put a hand on my shoulder.

Hot tears ran down my face and plopped onto my dusty knees. 'Do you know where she is?' I asked.

'The witch?'

'Can you take me there? Please. I think she's near here somewhere. I've got money.'

'Who told you about this witch?'

'A girl at school. Samantha Riley.'

The stranger thought about this for a few seconds. 'Riley, eh?'

'Yes.'

The bird had started squeaking again, perhaps even more loudly, and tried to lift its bulbous head off the ground. A line of ants trailed from its poor body into the undergrowth. 'Perhaps we should take him home?' the man said.

This seemed an amazing idea. 'What?'

He pointed down the hill with a long, thin finger. 'My house is nearby. Just down there. Perhaps we should take the bird back there and see if we can save him. What do you think?'

I thought about this for a minute, then nodded and

stood up. By now the sky was dark with orange smoke. I blew the ants from the bird's naked body as best I could and the man showed me how to carry it in the fold of my t-shirt. It weighed almost nothing but trembled like an organ against my stomach. The man told me his name was William. He said how hard it was to feed a wild animal, to get them to take food from a human. 'It's quite an art,' he said. I just followed him down Chinaman's Track in the bleakening afternoon.

William's house was hidden among thick trees about ten minutes further along the narrow path. I didn't even know it was there until we were nearly inside. Navigating through the cluttered cabin, he turned on some dim lights and stoked a small stove. He took the squeaking bird from me and placed it gently in a small, wooden box lined with fabric. I stood near the door, unsure what to do or what I was even doing here. Cats stalked through the shadows, like slow-moving fish. I looked back the way we had come. The path we had taken was vanishing in the darkness. An army of crickets shrilled. Mosquitoes whined past my face.

William moved quickly, gathering things together. He fluttered about his junkyard nest. After a while I crept further into the little house. Inside it was dark and cool and smelled of dried herbs and woodsmoke. 'I need you to help me,' he said.

I stood there without saying a word. What could I do? 'Can you help me?' he asked again.

I shrugged. I was hungry and wanted to go home. William waited. He seemed patient. 'Yes,' I said at last.

William showed me how to mash stuff in a mortar and pestle while he went out the back and collected things from his garden. I don't know what he used, or even if he knew what he was doing. It was hard work but I kept on grinding until there was a thick paste. William boiled something on the stove and added it to my mixture.

It took a while to grind the paste properly and I had to change hands a few times, but eventually it was ready and William drew some up in an eye-dropper. He handed it to me. 'There you go.'

I stared at the dropper in his stumpy fingers for a long time. His fingernails were all bitten and cracked. He didn't blink. The dropper shook minutely between his thumb and forefinger. One of the cats brushed against my leg. I jumped and William hissed at it to get out. I was afraid, but eventually took the dropper and angled the nib against the little bird's beak, my own mouth opening in sympathy as I did so.

The bird's head waved around like a plant in the wind. The poor little thing was obviously desperate but didn't understand how to eat, just sort of opened and closed its mouth randomly. Its tongue flickered and the liquid soaked into the cloth lining the box. It was hot. Sweat dripped down my face and into my mouth. The bird was

dying. It was dying.

I don't know how long I crouched over the box, making noises with my mouth, willing the tiny bird to drink. It seemed like hours, at least most of the night, but eventually we managed, this bird and me, to find some rhythm and by the time mum and dad arrived at William's house to fetch me, the little bird was gobbling food, raising its head eagerly towards the nib of the dropper. William told Mum and Dad what a great job I'd done and how I should come back tomorrow to feed the bird because I was so good at it. My parents weren't mad. They just hugged me, then looked over my shoulder as I fed the baby bird some more. My dad shook hands with William and they talked in low voices until it was time to leave. My mum carried me to the car and we drove, my mum and dad and me, all through the darkness until we were home.

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