



The Drowned Town

Keren Heenan

*T*he town's down there, he says, drowned, under all that water. I look and see the still, flat sheen broken by dead gums, the ripple of reflected birds overhead. A whole town? Down there? I look back at him then at the lake again, caught between wanting to believe in the impossibility of it and wanting him to tell me it's all a lie.

I imagine the streets laid out, doors and windows locked and waiting. The silent rush of that waiting. The stillness; all that wet desolation.

Just jokin', he says and punches my arm. And I see the streets and walls, the rooves and veranda posts fracture and shift, the neat streets ripple away. I see a shallow lake, nothing more. Of course it is not possible. The promise of a miracle, an impossible dream, all taken clean away with a punch. Gone in a ripple.

I feel the loss of something that never was. As if the secrets of the lake are simply that – secrets, never to be revealed. *All lakes carry secrets – secret worlds, secret lives, secret reasons.*

C'mon, he says, *we'd better get back. It'll be dark soon.*

When I turn away from the lake I hear a plover call from somewhere across the water. It reminds me of another time, another lake, and I'm locked in mid turn, and when the feeling passes I'm staring at a patch of ground. He says, *Come on, are you alright?* And I nod, I am now.

On the way home I can't stop thinking about all that water, the town that isn't really there. I want to go out to the lake again. At night, when

the moon is fat and yellow and makes rippling paths of light across the water; see the ghosts of the town, the house boards, street signs, television aerials and roof tiles. Waiting. I don't have to know the town is there, I just have to know that it could be. I'd dive in, glide through all that cool silence, a sigh tumbling and rolling around my ears. That is what I would do. If I were someone else. Someone braver.

But there are some things best kept in shadow – things too dark for the light, too heavy for the air. Pull them out and they'll wound you. But leave them there like germs and dust and mould and they'll break your heart with their sly and slippery ways. Always when you least expect.

We pull up near my flat, in the car park. *Did you have a good day*, he says, his face so full of hope, so light and bright although the sun is almost behind the building and the car park in shade. *Do you feel better now?*

I nod, remembering the drowned town that wasn't, the plover's plaintive call, and the way the water can hide anything from me because I could never plumb its depths.

See how things pass and you're left with something new, he says. *It always passes*. I nod. *You're alright now, aren't you*, he says, statement more than question. And I wonder if he is telling me, or himself. I can see an odd wild sort of fear in his eyes that I haven't noticed before, his eyes resting on a space somewhere between us. I know that space – for me, that is – I just don't know what it looks like for him. *You're alright*, he repeats.

I'm alright, I say. I take his hand and kiss it. That surprises him and he laughs, pulling it away awkwardly. We're not lovers, and never will be. Not that I want him to be – my lover, that is – I don't want anyone that close to me. I think I just wanted to surprise him, shock him even, to get back at him for the lie about the town.

It's funny, but I don't even know him that well. I've only just met him really. He'd been coming along to the sessions for a few weeks and we'd barely exchanged glances, when suddenly he says, *Do you do anything on Tuesdays, we could go for a drive, I like driving*. Just like that, as if we were old friends. His face was so expectant I couldn't disappoint

him. Besides, we'd just been talking about opportunities, about not ignoring social opportunities. Well, Wendy had been, our group 'leader'. Mostly we just listened, nodding occasionally to let her know we were involved. But of course we weren't really, we were all sitting in our own little worlds, heads full of secrets and fears even though that's what we were there for. To unload our fears, no matter how old, no matter how fresh. Somehow. A girl with blue hair and multiple piercings in her face and ears said, *I need a dump truck baby to unload my head*, and that made us all laugh, even Wendy.

When I got into the car with him, Eddie, this morning, I was shaky, like I'd drunk too much coffee, and I thought that suffocating feeling was going to hit me again. I didn't know what I was doing going out in a car with an almost complete stranger. What would we talk about? But I didn't have to worry because he did all the talking at first. He kept asking me questions but he didn't wait for answers, just kept adding bits himself; telling me about the scars on his sister's arms (and I thought that maybe he'd seen my wrists and I wanted to tell him it's not like that, I'm not like that, I just cut my hands and wrists on the glass when I was angry and crying so much I couldn't see where the glass was and I kept cutting myself when I tried to pick it up, I'm not like that, like his sister, I'm just... sad) and how his mother never got out of bed except to buy another bottle, and how his father had always kept a loaded shotgun on the top of the wardrobe as a sort of threat that it could end things one way or the other. *Things ended when he was cleaning the gun*, he said, *but no one knows for sure whether it was an accident or a sudden whim. I found him*, he said, *he was a mess*.

Then just before we got to the lake he turned to me and said, *So what about you?* And I started to get all shaky again and couldn't speak because there didn't seem to be a beginning. There were just words, all out of order, and none of them felt like the truth. So I just sat there staring at the road with one hand cradled in the other like a little bird. I willed the weight of its body into my hand so that I could have something to focus on while he kept turning his head towards me, then back to the road, until we pulled in a car park near the lake.

It wasn't until I saw the lake that my tongue unfroze. The lake was so

silver and vast, I wanted to tell him something so I told him my mother's story about the lost forest: how when they brought up the giant logs from the depths of the lake the logs seemed to sigh, and how one man made violins from the logs, and the violins sang the songs of all the lost forests of the world, because this was in a time when there were no more forests left. And how with the music they sang the dormant seeds from the ground, and all over the world new trees grew up in the pavements, between office blocks, in parking lots. He said, *Wow! Where did you hear that?* I told him I didn't remember because I didn't want him asking about my mother. But in my head I could hear her voice saying *the lake gave up its secrets, so the world could begin again.* But that's not true, the lake never gives up its secrets.

Then he told me the town was down there, drowned, and I so much wanted it to be true. Not because I want people to be drowned, or their possessions, their histories. I just wanted to think about the possibility of it all. Just wanted it to sit there like a promise, just a little bit longer. But now that it's not true it's like there's a secret locked away from me, for ever. But I don't tell him this. I know it doesn't make much sense, not even to me.

When I get out of the car near my flat, he winds the window down and says, *See you Friday night, eh?* I nod even though I'm not sure whether I'll go back.

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I dream about swimming through the streets; gliding through the cold and silent depths of the town, the water like a second skin around me. I have a sudden piercing thought that the town is waiting for me. And I have come. I wake with an unbearable sadness curling the edges of my tongue, like bitter tea, like hunger. When I was dreaming I understood why it was waiting, the town. But my waking mind can make no sense of it. There's a hollowness in my chest that goes on and on. I can't find the end of that hollowness. But I can still see the town, the grey streets and veranda posts, like the abandoned set of some Western town where the tumbleweeds blow in and across the camera lens.

The morning is all slow silence outside; cicada hum and birdsong. I roll out of bed and pull open the drawer where I keep the things I rarely

use. I step into the bathers, one leg at a time, and stretch the straps up and over my shoulders. I'd bought them at an op-shop once when I thought I would take swimming lessons. But I've never worn them. I tell myself I am just going to get them wet. Just the bottom of them. Perhaps just stand in water up to my thighs, maybe my waist. But I imagine the pressure on my stomach, the weight of all that blueness pressing, and a fist in my stomach tightens. I stare at myself in the mirror for a very long time before I pull a dress over the top of the bathers and walk out the door.

The pool is noisy and crowded. I watch a small boy on a polystyrene board, kicking his legs and putting his face in the water and taking big gasping breaths when he surfaces. His mother walks the side of the pool encouraging him, good boy, you're swimming now, that's it. I can see how the board keeps him afloat even when he's not kicking. But I won't be able to put my head under. I can't trust that the water won't fill my nostrils, seep into my lungs and stopper the breath.

I sit by the paddler's pool with the young mothers and their babies or toddlers. I sit in the shallows and watch the small children bravely splashing or the mothers coaxing them to put their faces in the water. I watch a woman holding her baby. She's having a conversation with another woman but she doesn't take her eyes off her baby's face as he sleeps in her arms. I think of my own mother and how, like everything that you can't hold, she had been a promise; a promise to forever.

I want to wake the baby and tell him *Look at your mother, look how she looks at you, she may not always be there*. But of course I don't. The women notice me looking and keep glancing at me and looking at one another with raised eyebrows. I remember my very unfashionable bathers and turn away from them and feign an interest in the water slide.

Eventually I get up and leave them. I sit on the side of the deep pool and dip my feet in the water, looking down at the way my feet seem to jerk sideways at the ankles where they are in the water. I think it would be that way with the town if it was underwater too: all the veranda posts, telephone poles and walls would be wavering broken lines, appearing to move in some slow symphony when really they are standing tall and straight. I imagine the blue skin of the pool broken by my dive,

the liquid ripple as I glide down towards the bottom. In the lake there'd be a sign announcing the town and its population, but I can't imagine what might be on the sign.

Beside me a very fat boy jumps into the water and makes such a splash that my chest and face are suddenly wet. I scramble to my feet, gasping. It gives me such a shock I feel like crying. He bounces up to the surface wiping his face and calls to his friend who jumps in next to him, one leg drawn up to his chest to make the splash bigger. I think of Eddie's father and the loaded gun he kept; a legacy even more awful than his blood splattered body. I think of my mother and how she'd shielded me from all things sad and brutal, as if death and unhappiness never occurred in reality: covering the television screen when a lion ripped a zebra apart, or talking loudly over rape and murder reports on the news. And yet. Would anyone have known where to look if I hadn't seen where she walked that day.

The fat boy squeals and fills his cupped hands with water. I collect my towel and go home.

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When Friday arrives I decide to go to the session but only so I can see Eddie again. Maybe he'll ask me to go for a drive again, I'd like that. Eddie has a different way of seeing. I think he always must've known the truth of things. Maybe I might tell him about my mother's lake, if I can find the right words, the right order. Not the lost forest lake, but another lake. The lake that keeps her secret.

There never was a city under the lake, or a town, where she lived, where I would live with her one day. I don't know why Eddie told me about a drowned town that really wasn't but could have been; like a story taken away before you can even see it clearly.

I'm standing staring up at a scrap of blue sky like I think it might tell me a new truth. There's light and air enough for me in that blue space. And I wonder if you need the water all around you before you find your own air.

Keren Heenan is an Art teacher living in Melbourne. Her short stories have been published in Australian magazines, she is currently working on a novel. 📖
