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The Pain of a Poet

Brian Crandall

INDIRA PARTHASARATHY, C.S.LAKSHMI,
ERA.MURUKAN, YONASON GOLDSON
AMITABH VIKRAM DWIVEDI, GREG PATTON,
STEVE CARR  ROBERT BEVERIDGE
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SHARMADA SHASTRY, THOMAS ELSON
CATHY SYDLO WILKES



FICTION

C. R. W. Noakes

Millicent, of the Water

A great wind rolled over the hilltops and down into the valley, carrying with it the chill of distant mountains and their grey clouds filled with wet promise. Millicent supposed this is what her father had been hoping for with all his dinner-table complaints of drought and impending bankruptcy, the rain was finally here.

For the first time in a long time, the workers wore their long-sleeved shirts with the sleeves rolled all the way down. Not rolled up, or forgoing shirts completely, as they did if the day grew long and hot enough. Millicent always wondered if the workers owned any other clothes, for they always seemed to dress day in, day out, in the same drab outfits. She also wondered if they had need for other clothing, as their entire lives seemed to be spent at the service of her father in the paddocks and sheds. When she asked her mother about this, Mrs. Goulding told her that of course they did, but they of course would not want to dirty their town clothes with their work.

The wind grew stronger through the morning and brought with it more and more dark clouds, until the great blue sky that served as the perennial backdrop to Millicent's life was obscured completely. The girl stood in the gathering rain not far from the veranda, knowing that if she strayed further into the weather her mother's infallible sense of improper behaviour would be alerted.

The smell of elm trees was all around her as the rain dotted the fabric of her dress. Millicent twisted this way, then that, her arms outstretched and her head tilted back, tracing the steps of an improvised dance to an imagined tune she carried in her head for moments such as these. As rare as it had been in recent memory, she had always loved the rain.

“Millicent!” Her mother’s voice snapped from behind her.

“Millicent, come inside at once out of this dreadful weather! You’ll ruin your dress, and what of your new shoes? You must try to be less foolish, you are nearly grown.”

Rudely awoken from her happy little daydream, Millicent opened her eyes and gathered her hat from the ground. She looked down at the shoes her mother was so concerned about, spotted with rain and rimmed with the damp of the grass. She just then felt the chill in the air, and wondered if she might catch cold. She wondered if her mother wondered too.

“I do not understand, dear, why you insist on trying to pass your time outdoors like a grubby little boy. There is so much more wonder, and beauty, and refined enjoyment to be gained from a good book.” Said Mrs.Goulding, striding ahead and making no effort to turn back and have her chastising more easily heard.

“Do you not think that Mrs.West or the men in the field would be inside reading if they knew how, or were afforded the opportunity?”

Millicent continued to look sullenly at her feet; she didn’t look up to see her mother looking around at her for an answer. Her mother so rarely imbued her criticisms with as personal touch as eye contact.

Despite her rather lofty and preposterous manner of speaking, Mrs.Goulding had been born and raised in Australia, not England. Not only was she of colonial birth, but her family were perpetually destitute publicans in the failing village of Collector along the highway between Melbourne and Sydney. Compared to the circumstances of her upbringing, the modest prosperity of the Goulding name she had married into was luxury. She conducted herself as if it were even greater an improvement than it was.

Mrs.Goulding could not understand why her eldest daughter seemed content to conduct and see herself as a modest farmer’s daughter, or even at times as a common child of a worker. She could not understand why Millicent didn’t squirrel herself away as she had done in her girlhood, absorbed in tales of greater and more interest-

ing things, always aspiring to be more than she was. After all, she often thought, if she had made so great an improvement in her standing through marriage, what social heights may the girl reach? If only she would aspire to it.

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Mrs.Goulding retired after lunch for her siesta, as she called it. Following Mrs.West out under the pretence of helping with the feeding of the workers, Millicent sought out old Harry. One of her father's family's longest standing employees, Harry had been relegated to little more than a gardener in his advanced age. As such he spent a great deal of time around the homestead tending to his duties, and given her great fondness of spending time in the garden, a great deal of time around Millicent.

"Harry! Harry!" The girl's voice cried out as she skipped over to sit herself beside him.

"Hello, girly. How's it going?" Harry asked, tearing off a piece of flat bread and sipping his tea. Despite many decades in the country, he'd never managed to escape the South African accent he'd acquired as a boy.

"Quite splendidly now that mother has gone to bed!" She replied, kicking her heels against the ground and smiling her little smile that somehow seemed to cover her whole face whenever she wore it.

"Can you tell me the story about the exploding dog again?" She asked, still smiling.

Harry choked on his tea, and looked fearfully over to where Mr.Goulding was stood talking to Mick and Chook about the logistics of the weening of the calves. Not so much fearing the response of the girl's father, but rather the belated lambasting he was sure to cop if word of his sharing with Millicent what Mrs.Goulding called colonial stories got around.

Harry leaned closer towards her from his perch on a stump-turned-stool. Millicent squatted down to meet his gaze.

"How about I do you one better, ey? How about I tell you a secret?" Harry said in little more than a whisper.

“How good of a secret?” Millicent replied.

“What if I told you that there’s a better swimming spot than that reedy little creek over the hill, even better than the big river half-way to town?”

Millicent had only ever seen the river a handful of times, and had certainly never been permitted to swim there. Her mother always insisted it was too cold, or the current too strong, or the whole idea too unseemly this near the road for a girl of her age.

“But Harry, I’ve still not been able to get mother’s permission to swim in the river! How am I to convince her that travelling to some secret spot I’ve heard from you is any better an idea?” Millicent said, a little too loud.

Mr. Goulding cast his glance over at the girl and the old man. Quite unlike his wife, he firmly believed that spending time with the rough and wily old Boer would do the girl some good. She lived such a sheltered life here. Especially so, thanks to his wife.

After he gave a nod and turned back to his own conversation, Harry continued.

“That’s the beauty of this secret spot of mine, Millie! It’s so close-by you could slip away and back without your mallie ever noticing you’re gone. I swear it.” Harry said, finishing with a tip of his nose and a wink.

It was several days of diligence and planning on Millicent’s part before the opportunity to slip away presented itself. Her father was off with most of the workers in one of the furthest paddocks, her mother had been struck ill the past two days and instead of retiring for her siesta after lunch, retired until the next morning altogether.

As soon as her mother’s door was closed, she grabbed the small satchel she had prepared and squirreled away behind the woodpile in the kitchen and made off out the door. In her little bag of provisions she had her bathing suit, which she had gone to great pains to point out had been lost to anyone and everyone that would listen, a towel to dry her hair and avoid suspicion upon her return, and an apple to keep her energetic if Harry’s secret spot really was as good as promised.

The secret Harry had told her about was the large reservoir hidden behind the big hill and a lot of bush, scarcely a 20 minute walk from the homestead. Kept in shadow under the canopy of the gumtrees that surrounded it, Harry said the water was always cool; but never too cold. And even if her father or mother or even Mrs. West were to come looking for her, they'd never check the reservoir. All the workers had been sworn to silence by Mrs. Goulding to never mention a word of it to Millicent, for fear she'd do exactly what she was on her way to do at that very instant.

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Some days later Harry's voice cried out over the hills. The sun had nearly set, and everyone was spread out across the property. They all came running at the sound, though, and reached the reservoir almost at the same instant.

Millicent had never swum alone before. She'd never been told about how the tussock grass can grow so long and parallel to the water that it looks like solid ground, but has nothing but water and rock underneath. She'd never been told not to dive into water you can't see through, at least without checking first. On top of all the other silly things that Mrs. Goulding thought, she thought that she could skip so many things a girl of twelve should have known. She thought that out here and so alone, that Millicent would have been safe.

Old Harry never owned up to anything either. But it was the least he could do after days of searching, to go and find her there. Little Millie. Face down in the water.



C. R. W. Noakes is an Australian writer/photographer currently travelling the world, leaving local languages butchered in his wake.

A graduate of the University of Wollongong's creative writing program, his words have been published in *20x20 Magazine*, *Tide*, and *The Writer's Junction*.