

## *The Meeting*

Melissa Bruce

The jogger left home at the usual time.

Grey day. An effort to leave the house. Crossing the road felt good, leaving everything behind – phone, computer and hidden house keys. Sometimes a person just had to run from it all, even if they'd be back within the hour.

The slim bitumen path ran alongside the cliffs. You could hear the ocean fighting the coastline below. Eating its way, decade by decade, into the side of Australia.

The swell was high. Wind warnings. Her ears felt icy already. A familiar rhythm of breath and pace. Counting the time for inhalation and exhalation helped with a sense of progress.

She passed a man walking two white terriers. She always passed this man. No hello. She tried a couple of times but he was not one for good mornings.

She passed a woman pushing a pram with two identical children. It was strange to her that someone could produce two of the same while she couldn't produce any.

Speckles of rain. An unenthusiastic day. Positivity an effort though she was not prone to the glass being half empty.

She passed a woman who had stopped by the fence to look at a ship on the horizon. The woman wore a heavy tweed coat and was perfectly still.

The sea was dark. Slate. Unforgiving.

She jogged to the very end of the path, a self-agreed point that made it safe to say exercise had been done for the day, and there she reversed direction. The turnaround was good. The new perspective was always refreshing.

She thought of the chores planned for the rest of the day. Probably needed a holiday. Things were in a perfect routine – a little dull – too easy.

She passed a council landscaper. He wore a luminous yellow vest and was tending to the last dead eucalyptus tree they had planted in the rain-free spring. He had a limp. She nodded to him but had nothing distinctive about her that the landscaper seemed to remember.

One two three in ... One two three out ...

Coming back down the final stretch of hill before the ground levelled out, she saw the woman still at the fence. One two three in ... The woman was taking off her coat. One two three out ... A cold day for a choice like that. One two three in ... She hung it neatly over the rail.

The jogger felt something half-empty. One two three out ... The woman climbed onto the first rail of the fence. *Was she getting a better perspective?* The jogger slowed down to a walk.

The woman's hair was unbrushed, almost grey. She climbed up to the second rail. The jogger stopped walking.

'Hi. Not a very nice day?'

The woman turned to look at her with washed-out eyes that might have been blue and then back at the horizon.

'Are you alright? Excuse me? Are you okay?'

The woman turned slowly to look at the jogger again. She moved her hair gently from her eye. The gesture reminded the jogger of someone familiar. Someone close.

The jogger looked around. Nobody else. The man with the terriers far away.

'Just needed a witness,' the woman said.

'Sorry?' said the jogger. 'I didn't quite hear you, the wind.'

The woman repeated the hair-moving gesture. For how many years had she done this? Fifty? Sixty? She then brought one leg over the fence, stretching her charcoal skirt. Sensible shoes.

'Doesn't matter,' she said and brought the other leg over. The jogger remembered her aunt brushed aside her fringe with the same gesture.

'You're not going to jump are you?' she asked, half-joking, very still now, never been in a position like this. The woman looked out at the ship, then back at the jogger.

'Had enough,' she said. And left.

Angry ocean. Tenacious. No thump. No scream. Nobody else watching.

The jogger could feel the thud of her pulse. Not from running. She felt sick. *What to do?* She walked close to the fence, leant over to have a look. Steep thick grass, a cactus bush with a lone yellow flower. Beneath the ledge of the cliff was nothing. No visible rocks. Just sea. Beside her, the woman's coat. Still warm. She felt quite sick. *Should I have tried to stop her?*

The jogger stared at the place where the woman had disappeared as though the scene might be reversed. The wind picked up. Made a high wire sound through the fence. Her sweat began to cool.

*What to do? Leave? Someone will find the coat. Call the police? Change the whole day. Do nothing?*

Nobody around. Still. She felt nauseous. One two three in ... One two three out ...

She cut across the grass to the road, ran away from her new relationship. Thought to wave down a car. Changed her mind. Crossed the road. Rang a doorbell. No answer. Rang another doorbell. The blind man answered the door. The one who jogged on the main road every morning, tied to his personal trainer.

'May I use your phone, please?' Her voice was shaky, unnecessarily urgent. 'I just saw a woman jump off the cliff.'

After she called the police, the blind man accompanied her to wait beside the coat as they had requested. He held her arm and carried his white stick. Other people went by with no idea that something significant and strangely insignificant had very recently happened. There was silence between them.

'Do you live around here?' he finally asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, any time I've been out in the mornings I've seen you jogging past. You must be really fit.'

'Well,' he said. 'Yes. Got to make the most of what you've got.'

Two police cars arrived within fifteen minutes. Sirens. No point. They found a Medicare card in the pocket of her coat. Janet Murray. It wouldn't be in the papers. One of the rare topics forbidden.

After the interview, the jogger asked the older policeman if he had ever seen someone jump before. He put his notebook away and said, 'One here every week. On average, one a week.'

The jogger had heard the helicopters, daytime, night-time. She had seen the rescue squads, practising or retrieving – there wasn't much difference. She had watched the searches by sea but she had never fully contemplated the moment of departure.

*Was it a courageous act? Or not?*

'I mean have you actually *seen* it?' she said. 'She did it right in front of me. It was like she was almost waiting for me to arrive before she left.'

'That's not unusual,' he said. 'Without a witness it's treated as suspicious. Had one myself last week. Got to the forty-fourth floor. The man who'd called us invited us in. His balcony doors were open. "So glad you're here," he said, walking towards the balcony, and went straight over the rail.'

'Do you find it hard to deal with that sort of thing?' she asked.

'Wouldn't be long in this job if I did.'

The policeman took her phone number and asked if she would come down to the station to give a statement later, when he called her. The other police were busy taping the area. Now they would have to go about the business of retrieving the body. If it landed on the rocks they would use the helicopter; in the sea they would need a boat and perhaps a diver.

The blind man, who had been leaning on the fence and listening, came closer to the jogger.

'Think I'll go home now,' he said. 'You alright?'

'Fine, yes, thanks so much. I'll walk you home,' she said.

'No, I'm right. I'm alright. Thanks.' He looked in her direction. 'See you round,' he said.

The jogger watched him make his way across the grass. She heard the helicopter arriving. She stared out at the ship still on the horizon. What would she do with this thing she had involuntarily witnessed? This irrelevant thing. This memorable thing. This intimate meeting.