

Jennifer Webb

ANY GUARANTEE

This is one of those situations where in a better-ordered world we might expect to find a scientist, a doctor and a tough hero type volunteering to be shrunk down to the size of miniature ants and then to clamber carefully into a tiny motorized capsule and be inserted into the rectum of this terribly sick but very important woman. Their mission? To roam her body, seeking out the unfathomable cause of her malaise. Their chance of success? Well, what can we say? If it's a movie, their chance of success is—after some travail and self-doubt—100%. If not a movie, possibly 4%.

Send them in anyway. It's inside the body that the truths of being emerge. Only here are the gross tender mechanisms of breath and circulation and digestion truly visible. It's only here that the ingestion of a clear liquid will lead without faith, without knowledge, without choice or cultural orientation to a quick writhing death. And only here is the Absolute, only in the body, here and now, here in this world where even the Pope falls asleep at prayer and all we have is chance and change.

This is the sick woman, the woman in question, the important woman. She is the vice-president of an important banking group. I won't say which one. You probably already know. And she was fine, fighting fit, until last week when she was working at her desk late one evening, and then she lifted her head from the document and looked at the wall and saw smears of blood, patchy red clouds drifting across the air in the room, and she sighed briefly, laid her head on the desk, and was there till morning.

Wouldn't you have thought her family might have called? Shouldn't they have noticed her absence?

This is her family: see her husband, that evening over dinner at their home, dinner with banking executives and their wives, and her mother there too, and their friends, and he opened his mouth in the middle of the second course and said, apropos of nothing, "What I've been wanting to say is, I've noticed that we're catering more and more to the immigrants. And what do they give us in return? All I hear is a mob of foreigners yapping away in their native tongues." *Looking around at his audience.* "Is this right? Shouldn't we have some rules in this country?"

And whatever their personal politics, none of her guests knows where to look; and "Why won't anyone talk about it except me?" he says. A moment's

awkward shifting on seats, and silent fish-eyed glances across the table, and then the guests regain their poise and the conversation kicks back into gear, almost seamlessly. Then dinner is through, and they finish their coffee, and her guests and friends begin to take their early leave. Her mother whispering as she kisses her goodbye: *he's getting old; leave him.*

Later that night: there she is, lying in bed. She has refused her husband's attentions. He says, petulantly, "But you always complain that I never join in the conversation? And then when I do, what?"

Later still. She is lying in bed, thinking about her husband's friend, her husband's partner in their little quantity surveying firm. The one who glances obliquely at her breasts. She thinks—yes, him, my husband's friend—and the next morning from her desk in her office high in the building in the middle of the city, she called him, her husband's friend, and called him to herself. All very well, you might say, and you might see why she'd do it, but it turned back on her. What happened was she did indeed fuck him, out of a spirit of malice, or maybe of mischief, but by evening she had stopped laughing and by nightfall she had fallen, temporarily, in love.

Now wouldn't you think that she'd have known better than that? And why with him? Her husband's friend (now better designated her friend, I'd guess), who looks into her eyes, his scarlet cheeks and yellow hair. His eyes are Dutch blue, and flat, and worried. With him? But with anyone it would still be: why him? Why? And certainly with him it was almost instantly routine, within mere weeks passion had turned to irritation, and now instead of one trying relationship she had two, two men she could barely bear to see, each with a claim to stake on her mind, her body, her life.

There she lies now, four months later, on the hospital bed, in the theatre where the walls are sterile and the smells are of antiseptic and body fluids. Doctors with green faces. Husband and lover both in the observation deck—is that what they call it?—high above the action, but really, what can they see? Her face is obscured by a gas mask, an anaesthetist hunches over her head, her body is draped in white linen and four white-gowned people mill around her. It's like she's flying into cloud.

Her husband, watching, knows she had grown frail, but doesn't know about the lover. Her lover, his business partner, knows she had grown frail, but doesn't know about her ... we might call it her *epiphany*. She has always played her cards close to her chest, and now inside her chest her heart is beating lazily, skipping every so often, and her lungs are thick with cloudy tar, and her gut is winding sluggishly through her abdomen and if there were a capsule with

miniaturised men inside her, what would they see, what would they do, how would they recognise what is ailing her?

I know. I think I know. I met her last year on a plane trip, a long trip, flying right across the country, and she was a somewhat nervous passenger. As we took off her fingernails dipped into the seat, and then she caught up my hand. We were both in first class, she because she's rich, me because although somewhat impoverished I dress exceptionally well, and the plane was overbooked, and they looked at me in my poised stance and my elegant suit and upgraded me, lucky me. So there we were, big soft seats, free wine, meals on china not plastic. Who wants democracy when you can have privilege?

She turned to me during the meal, as people often do, and told me about her husband and his gauche politics, and her lover and his flushed complexion. She told me about her busy days and her shallow life, and she told me she wondered, more and more, why she tolerated this, the only life she'd have.

I waited for my cue. I know one or two things about meaning, though I'm not resolutely committed to them. These are the things I know: one—meaning is something you need; two—belief helps. And this is how I came by my knowledge: one day in a taxi the driver told me Amway provided his assurance, and he gave me a book to read. One day in the Mall the rounders-up for the soapbox preacher told me God provides consolation, and gave me a pamphlet to read. I read and reread both texts, and since I carried them with me always, even onto the plane, I passed them on to her, hoping she'd find assurance and consolation. In exchange she gave me her card, though I never got around to calling her.

And that is about all I know that is off the public record. What we all know now, other than the fact that she is dying under the scalpel and the tubes and the hissing tanks of air, is that she took my words very seriously, and immediately began to seek things out. Well certainly, I am myself a seeker after truth. And I too am given to doubts about what we understand as the natural order of things. I talked to her a little about these matters, and she took notes. What I couldn't have been expected to expect, though, was that her responses, her choices, her reactions were so—well, so naive.

Imagine this. She lived surrounded by pleasure. Her big comfortable house, her big comfortable office, her calm personal assistant, her driver, her cook, her au pair. You'd think she was living in South Africa, so cosseted she was, so many to cater to her needs. So, why so needy? She checked the Yellow Pages first, looking for groups and organisations that are committed to the search for truth. She went through the Anabaptists and then the Baptists, the

Congregationalists, the Existentialists, the Festival of Light, the Mormons, the Rosicrucians and the Samaritans. She tried the ones designated only by initials: *est*, *tm*, *YWAM*. She tried those less obviously concerned with higher truth: American Aestheticists, Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers. She avoided eastern religions, claiming she'd travelled enough in India to doubt the ability or at any rate the integrity of their gods. She avoided any that are truly determined—the Satanists, the Scientologists, the Born Agains—feeling it best not to be too confrontational, given that she was, after all, seeking a meaning with which she could live. And finally one day, walking through the Mall, she received a call. Here now, it happened—she'd been called, by a short stocky man whose eyes were warm though his teeth were somewhat untended. His name was Paul. Paul Stewart. And "Listen!" he howled, he howled at her. "You—you there, stop here, and hear!"

And as she walked, or rather scuttled awkwardly by—"You! you are weighted and freighted with everyday anxieties. You eat and drink and breed and work and drive around in polluted air. You suffer from colds and headaches and the rumblings of the body when just by trusting me, you could instead be living like clouds, on air."

And she stopped, and she recognised herself in his harangue, and her heart sank, but she listened. She took out her diary and took notes. She reached out her hand, and led him down off his stand, and led him to her office where she offered him coffee he wouldn't drink.

He was surprising convincing. And why not? Aren't we all, after all, buried in work, in sex, in the hope of holidays abroad? We are lost in a heavy sweating eating grinding shitting sleeping teeth-scouring world and when we look at the sky, we see only dust. It's time (*she thought*) to try for something more. I'll try it, she thought, just for a few weeks, the fasting will do me good anyway.

She moved to a motel, for privacy. And there and at work she screened her calls, screening out her husband and her lover, his friend. In the hours she would normally have given to eating, to bathing, to sex, she played over and over in her head like a mantra his voice saying, "Listen!" and herself listening, and she fell into minutes of meditation, into hours when she could list all she knew.

This is what she knows: the history of banking in general, and of her bank in particular; her own particular history through high school and business school and promotions. Her mother's beauty routine, which she follows intermittently. That she used to love her husband, and doesn't any more. That she doesn't love her lover either. That she has a pap smear and a cholesterol test and a routine

checkup every two years, and it costs her what for me would be a week's salary. That Europe exists, because she has seen it, that India exists, because she has seen it, that Chile almost certainly exists although she's never been there. That things written are not always true, but that things said are not necessarily more reliable.

As for the things she believes: she believes in the possibility of Chile. In the possibility of meaning. That her life could be better, or on the other hand could easily be shucked off. That she'd be no happier if she'd had children of her own. That her husband is sleeping with the au pair. That this belief causes her no distress. That interest rates will fall and rise regardless of what she does in her bank; and that her bank will survive, will continue to flourish even in these constrained times. That nothing really very matters much, after all. And that she can actually live like a cloud, on air.

So she did; for two hours, then a day, then three days, then a week, and if she was beginning to feel frail, well, that's what you expect when shedding the past. She stopped looking into mirrors. She continued to go into work, and to sign everything that required her signature, and to watch her colleagues and juniors in board meetings, wondering. Two weeks. Breath coming shorter now. That's okay. She believes it's okay. Two weeks and three days. Four days. Four days and a night and then she lifts her head from the document and looks at the wall and sees smears of blood, patchy red clouds drifting across the air in the room, and she sighs briefly, and lays her head on the desk.

And some reasons for this, her first real failure? One, inadequate belief; two, the mechanics of the body which, regardless of belief, craves food, craves a routine, yearns for someone's—anyone's—touch. Three, her own preexisting state of health which is possibly a little fragile, possibly just waiting for the last moment of executive stress. And four, as the doctor says, voice aghast, "People have to realise that they can't live on air. It can't be done."

Tubes in her veins, up her nose, down her throat. There she lies on the white bed, her blue lips and white face against the starched sheet and the doctors' gowns and the masks as the machines whistle and breathe. And we'll leave her there, under their watchful care.

Today I am again flying across the ocean, travelling this time to North America where people are more hopeful, more innocent, where people will take the increasingly risky chance of believing, where I can hope to find—among the massing throngs, among the poor and needy and the wealthy and confused—others who will believe what I believe, whose faith will sustain them in the absence of food or love, who will learn to live like clouds, who will learn to

identify within their own bodies the rush and sigh of blood and lymph and air, to feel the spring of tendon and muscle and the grinding of the gut and the pumping of the arteries and then to feel the air move through them like clouds, to drift into attenuated bliss, until at the right moment they will come with me to the top of the tallest building in the biggest city and wait with me for the true saviour to come drifting by and float us all away.