

Maria Simms

PASSIONFLOWER

Sand whorls a gritty dance across the beach and oyster coloured clouds slide along the sea's horizon. Strangely, the sun shines only on one strip of the beach, throwing dunes with spiky grass and tiny white flowers into bright relief from a dark surround of bruised sky. There's a bay further on, perhaps sheltered from the lashing green sea. Julia can see herself pushing out against the foam then hurtling back towards the shore, arms flailing in the suck, lift and overpowering down lunge of water.

This is not easy weather. It's not the weather she pictured when strung out, chattering tired, she saw herself lying, languidly, even, given enough sleep, sensually, on the fine white sand of a pristine Queensland beach.

The twist of her sarong whips apart. Material streams behind, flapping from her waist like a flag. Clutching at the sarong, then towel, she fixes wind-watering eyes on a distant outcrop of rocks forming the bay. A small backpack knocks against her spine.

It was a buffeting wind—pushing, stroking, teasing. It's sly fingers wound through your hair, slid across eyelids, prised under clothes. Being at the centre of an elemental frenzy was comforting though, cleansing perhaps, after our uneasy stay in Arcadia, a blot—still—on the journey. I remember staring at an outcrop of rock along the beach like I'd looped a lifeline around it to get me there. Rocks. Juttings of smoothness and sharpness. Dark to almost black in places. Volcanic probably.

Julia stands on the black rocks, carefully avoiding scattered jags of broken glass. The bay is a moving pavlova crust. All white peaks. No decent breaks. Shore slop she's heard surfers scoff, standing young on Australian beaches gazing out over folded, golden arms. In the midst of the whiteness bobs a lone swimmer, his bearded head bouncing like a charred cork in a washing machine. She swims out past him. They thrash about in the waves, together in their separate swimming, their aloneness in this place. The current pulls them towards each other.

He's there smiling as she comes up after another flailing failure. She smiles back—ruefully to let him know she knows they're sharing an experience that could be better and yet if it was they wouldn't be sharing it, each on their separate waves. Can you get that into a smile. She doesn't think so. Anyway she smiles.

"If you're looking for land ...," he says and Julia's startled. This whole journey has been about land. "I know a couple of lots of 40 acres that are terrific."

Julia can't believe what she's heard.

"Can you grow anything on them?" she shouts for something to say. She struggles against turbulence to keep in contact with him.

"Water. They've got water. That's what you want. Have to watch out for that. Lots of land around here but it doesn't have water. Nothing's fertile without it. People get caught out."

He shouts as waves slapping together hit them from both sides.

"There's a water table ... under both of them."

A developer, she suspects and laughs then dives as a large swell cracks above. Churning whiteout. Fierce swimming, head into the torrent to avoid being dumped.

Up again.

"Who owns them?" water streaming from hair, eyes, nose.

"Dunno."

Diving again. Breaking the surface.

"But there's records at the Council." His voice reaches her with flying spume.

"The land's along Matchbox Road."

"Do you own land here?"

Now they're being divided by a surge in the current.

"Passionfruit," he shouts, "I rent the land. Wounded in Vietnam. On a pension. The banks won't lend me money. I grow passionfruit."

Julia's sweeping in an arc towards the rocks. She turns to keep facing him and just hears, "You'd have passed us as you drove in ... djiyou see the vines?"

She does remember—on the way to where they've camped at Deep Spring—driving past rows of what she realises must have been passionfruit vines. Their bright green leaves were backlit by the afternoon sun. Tendrils wound around wires and posts, coiling their way high into the warm yellow air. She waves to indicate she knows the place.

"Drop in," he shouts, "I'm Rees. They call me Rees." There's a surge in the water and they're swept apart.

Julia watches him limp to where his things are tucked under dune bush. A long indentation carves a rough valley down his right thigh.

I watched him walking. The powerful upper body and that huge scar cutting a valley down the leg. Then I was alone and I didn't know this place even though the next swell would probably carry me back towards the shore.

"I've moved the tent closer to the table." Tim's bending over a tent peg wielding a small hammer. Tap tap tap. Pulls a rope taut. Tap tap tap.

They're out of the wind in an eerie stillness of forest strident with unseen activity. Julia looks into the shadowgreen underscape of trees climbing a hill behind the tent. Somewhere in the brush a bird repeats a call over and over.

Relentlessly. Is it waiting for an answer or is this just something it does absentmindedly she wonders.

"I just can't stand those crabs." Tim stands looking at the round holes crabs have burrowed everywhere in the sand around their camp site.

A corner of the tent's floor had covered a crab hole last night.

"I'm glad you moved it." Julia watches the leg she's draped over the arm of the folding chair she's sitting in, swing back and forth.

"I heard a crab scratching at the plastic under my ear last night. On and on it went," she adds.

"I heard it too Jules." Jules he says because he's being plaintive. He looks sideways at her knowing she hasn't forgiven him for Arcadia. Something inexplicable happened there—a confusion of twisted thoughtlines and life habits. Sometimes when you leave home, when you're outside your life, that's when you notice things about it, oddities usually buried in its daily enactment. Embedded there and familiar, the behaviour isn't seen as peculiar or cruel. Loosened from the cushioning of its usual surroundings, an oddity of Tim's had emerged blinking into the hot sunlight of Arcadia—a deficiency of kindness exposed in the bare landscape of a Queensland town. They don't talk about it.

"The place was alive with crabs. Couldn't face crossing sand again tonight."

"It was weird wasn't it?" She laughs remembering.

They'd watched, Tim horrified, Julia fascinated, the night before, their first there, as white crabs began to move across the sand outside the circle of lamp light. So startling. First you just saw it out of the corner of your eye. Tim thought he'd imagined movement. Then another, then dozens and Tim holding the table as they stood marooned on their brick floor, their island in the expanse of crab traffic between them and the tent.

"I just hoped it'd dig another tunnel out," he continues. "But it didn't. Just kept scratching."

"Yes." Julia brushes sand from the knee bent over the chair. The bird's stopped calling. She stares up watching clouds skim their windrush across the sky. She tells Tim about Rees and the land.

Rattle, rattle, rattle. They bounce along the red gravel road towards lunch at Rees's farm.

"The commercial Passionfruit is one of some 500 species belonging to the family Passifloraceae. The name, passionflower, is reported to have been given by the missionaries in South America. This is because the central floral parts resemble a cross and crown of thorns."

*(Brian Cull and Pat Lindsay. 1995. **Fruit Growing in Warm Climates.** Sydney, Australia: Reed Books.)*

The station wagon rolls through the gate and up the dirt road past rows of passionfruit quietly tendriling along trellises, spiralling through sundrench. The car stops at the front steps of the weatherboard house built

white and neat on a slight hill. Rees appears on the verandah and waves. He vaults his body down the steps using the handrails like gym equipment and has the car door open before the engine's off. A large red kelpie blurs around the side of the house, rocketing into the car, onto Julia's lap, paws sliding off her thighs, scrambling on again, off, on, his tongue licking Julia's face then Tim, Julia, Tim in long, loving swipes.

"Glad you could ... get out of there Hector. Rees, don't let him do that. Rees had to have a dog—and of course we all adore him, the dog I mean, we just put up with Rees." Sylvie's round face has dimpled into smiling as she heads down the steps, determined eyes on the dog.

Peering up at her through agitating bits of red dog hair, Tim sees that an exquisite, dark haired creature carrying a young child on her hip has followed Sylvie out of the house. She remains distant though, standing back in the cooler shade of the verandah.

"Sorry. He's young." Rees whistles, then leans into the car to haul out the dog.

"Well the truth is," he grins, his and the dog's head crowding against Julia's, the dog swipes now including Rees, "we can't do a thing with him." Julia scrambles out of the car and stands looking around.

"Water levels should be maintained to avoid wilting of the vine during periods of active growth."

Sprinkler arms swept water in giant circles over rows of vines on the farm, their shower trails poised, silver in the sun for endless time before falling earthwards. There were jerks though almost unnoticeable from the road. You'd think the arms moved smoothly but I saw that they actually moved in a series of small jerks.

"This is Elen, my daughter—well Rees's daughter really, and her son Ben." Sylvie indicates the pair on the verandah.

Julia smiles up at girl as they all climb the steps.

Elen nods.

Earthy, Tim decides about Sylvie. Generous shapes—breasts, hips. And a low, warm voice. Soft, round, luscious. They go into the house. Elen follows still carrying Ben. On the way through Tim shakes the baby's hand and introduces himself. Ben pulls the hand away, then holds it out again. Tim plays a game, running his finger around the small palm. Then he tucks a sudden tickle-you-under-there into the child's armpit. Ben shrieks with delight and squirms his face into Elen's chest then turns back, reaching his hand out again.

*I'd dropped behind the group to watch because I was surprised to see Tim playing with the child. The book **Fruit Growing in Warm Climates**, was lying on a table in the hall and for some reason I picked it up and took it out the back with me where we were to have lunch.*

The book is mine now, I'm embarrassed to say. That's not to say I wouldn't steal it again, if events were repeated. I would feel shame at the act though. And a certain bewilderment as to why I did it.

Out the back, between the house and acres of vine, are patches of grass with fruit trees growing here and there. Lunch spreads along a solid, wooden table under a pergola. Overhead, grape vines filter light into caressing softness. Rosy shouldered mangoes, smooth skinned, green avocados and pinkish purple grapes scatter over the table with cheeses and bread. A glass water jug drips condensation past the slices of lemon hanging inside. At the centre of the table a tall, chipped vase trails branches of passionfruit. Delicate passionflowers, their fine white fringes curled back from waxy green centres, bloom among the dark, deeply scored leaves. Passionfruit halves have been piled into a terracotta dish.

Julia wanders out to the table ahead of the others and sits reading in the pergola softened light.

"The Purple Passionfruit is finer flavoured and often sweeter than the yellow form. The edible pulp, with its fragrant odour and strong but delicate flavour, ranges in colour from bright orange to greenish-yellow. The pulp contains many small seeds, either brown or black in colour, which are normally eaten with the pulp."

She reaches for a passionfruit half and is sucking at the pulp when Sylvie comes out of the house carrying a bottle of wine and opener in one hand and a tray of food in the other.

"Thank God you came." Sylvie shoves the tray onto the table.

Too late to discard the shell.

"You read, I see."

Julia looks at her thinking of the fruit shell in her hand and the sharp sweet taste in her mouth.

"We must talk. Books and music and film. As much as we can fit in before you leave." Still holding the bottle, Sylvie has leant back against one of the upright pergola beams.

"Rees doesn't know how I suffer—the isolation," she jokes putting her other hand to her forehead, "You mustn't tell him."

"What?" How she suffers? It's tragic." Rees comes through the door.

She turns to him, offers the bottle to be opened and laughs. "What about reading *The Tempest* after lunch?"

"I don't think so Sylvie. We'll want to relax after lunch."

Tim comes through the door.

"And Tim will direct us. It's decided."

"I'd rather not." Rees struggles with the cork.

"It'll be fun Reesie—won't it Julia."

Julia places the shell on the table, carefully.

"The Passionfruit, like many other crops, bears best on the most fertile, high water-holding capacity, but freely drained soils. However, they will tolerate quite poor soils, both nutritionally and structurally, if treated properly."

I see Rees's daughter again, and again, standing in that archway. One hand almost casually holds the frame but I keep seeing the fingertips pressed into the wall, the knuckles made angular and white with the pressure.

A shy boy called Laurie arrives from a farm somewhere nearby. Julia pours a glass of wine and decides to go with the flow. She finds herself sitting next to Elen with Laurie at the end of the table. Ben is asleep on Tim's lap, his head against Tim's chest, baby red lips curled around his thumb and a piece of Tim's t-shirt clutched in the fingers.

"There's no father around." Elen says, unasked. "It's hard to have a child on your own," she murmurs, working at the creases in a paper napkin.

"Yes," Julia says, "It would be," but can't see that Elen's very much on her own. Shy Laurie keeps looking at her and Julia's intrigued by her ethereal quality.

Elen is monosyllabic, drawing translucent eyelids over thought as she lowers her eyes to the napkin straightening. Suddenly she lifts her head, reaches for her glass and looks directly at Julia who sees her own past in the shadowed eyes—herself as a young woman facing the shock of life with a child.

Sitting opposite, Rees talks and laughs in the soft light.

Julia feels compelled to touch Elen's hands—to still the napkin twisting. She's jolted by a sense of transgressing the girl's privacy.

The screen door kicks open and Sylvie comes out of the house carrying her teacher's set of *The Tempest*.

"There's a copy for everyone. You lucky things," she calls, waving a copy from the top of the pile. "Tim's directing but I'll cast the roles because I prepared lunch. It's only fair isn't it?" She smiles winningly at all of them.

You have to admire her. Julia sees Rees doing just that, leaning back, side on in his chair, appraising.

"Rees will be Prospero."

Elen lifts Ben, who's still asleep, from Tim's lap and disappears inside.

Decked out in a white sheet and holding a stick to which Tim has attached a long blue ribbon he's scrounged from somewhere, Prospero, the outcast Duke of

Milan, stands, silent on a patch of grass bordered by his passionfruit sea. Julia's been cast as Prospero's daughter. She sits nearby waiting for her cue and hoping for thespian inspiration. Laurie has plonked himself on a blanket arranged by Sylvie under the orange tree.

In the light of their first meeting Julia is disconcerted to see in her first lines—*If by your art, my dearest father, you have put/ the wild waters to this roar, allay them.*

Tired of waiting for Sylvie to appear from the house, Rees takes a deep breath, raises his stick and begins Prospero's lines. He whirls around slowly, waving the stick so that the blue ribbon ripples away from him like ocean waves. He chants, *I have done nothing but in care of thee, (Of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter).*

His voice is deep and the lines wash over them in melodious rhythms. Julia notices he isn't holding a copy of the play.

Decked out as the beast Caliban, Sylvie springs from the house. She's magnificent in shades of green. A green vine coils up one leg of her tights. It winds around her hips, across her chest and drops over her shoulder. Her face is a greenish mask with a dark painted leaf reaching around one cheek. Passionfruit flowers and black rooster feathers trail from her hair. Her mouth is a wide, deep green, sea anemone.

"Someone wake that wretch, Laurie." Anemone lips open and close as she crosses the grass. "He's gone to sleep on Caliban's cave."

Cast as Ariel, the island sprite, but tired of waiting, Laurie's collapsed into dozing. He's spreadeagled on the blanket, one arm over his eyes against the light. Called to duty he climbs onto a low branch of the orange tree.

"I come To answer thy best pleasure; be't to fly, To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride on the curl'd clouds ..." Arm hooked around the tree he shouts his lines—a mad, tree dangling Ariel.

"Within the Yellow Passionfruit form, which is used for root stocks, incompatibility exists. Without cross-pollination from another line no fruit is set. In practice, they can be grown adjacent to a hybrid Passionfruit and the resulting seed from the Yellow Passionfruit is suitable for rootstocks. However, it is not suitable for production of new mother seed plants."

And the show unfolds its ancient human tragedy. Caliban berates Prospero.

"When thou cam'st first, Thou strok'dst me, and made much of me; wouldst give me water with berries in it ...," she reproaches, hunched over with her front vine dragging along the ground. Suddenly she rises from the grass, charging. She pushes Prospero against the tree and roars into his face, *"and then I loved thee."* Prospero, whose head has ricocheted off the trunk of the tree, swings away. It

seems more like Rees than Prospero though who picks up the blue ribboned stick and rounds on Caliban.

"*Thou most lying slave, Whom stripes may move, not kindness!*" He lashes the ribbon at Caliban. "*I have used thee, Filth as thou art, with human care; and lodged thee In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate The honour of my child.*"

Tim, watching from the sidelines, and Julia still on the grass, are finding the subtleties of character confusing.

"*Oh ho, Oh ho! would it had been done!*" Sylvie, very evident in Caliban now, grabs the ribbon and the stick with it from Prospero's grasp. She snaps the stick and throws the pieces at what must now be Rees.

"Bitch," Laurie—surely not Ariel—leaps from his tree perch onto Sylvie. Knocked to the ground she sits panting, staring at Laurie who stands over her. The vine leaves on her chest rise and fall with her breathing.

In the kitchen Julia stands across the room from Sylvie who hiccups a sob now and then as she sends plates clattering into the dishwasher. Her eyes burn grief out of smudged green.

"I always wanted a child." She reaches for a piece of paper towel and attempts to staunch her eyes. "Rees and I have tried everything—all the IVF shit—everything!" She wipes her nose.

Julia notices that tears have cut rivulets through Sylvie's green paint and gather in the corners of her mouth. A rooster feather has plastered itself to one temple.

"And then Elen just goes and has a baby. Just like that."

There's a pause. Julia gazes past the anguished face, through the window, and the anguish of the struggle with her own girl-woman daughter, Callie, hits like a body blow. The day seems so normal outside. Trees. Afternoon sun. And that bird again.

She listens to the bird. The one repeating its call over and over. And thinks of the beautiful, fragile girl she can't seem to reach.

"I can't touch that child!" Sylvie whispers. Her back's to the bench. She's leaning forward, elbows raised behind. Both hands grip the edge of the benchtop.

"I can't," she repeats, staring at Julia. "That child should be mine."

They stand in a moment billowing with enormous truths. The passionflowers knotted through Sylvie's hair shiver as she cries. Sensing someone behind them Julia turns.

I turned and Elen was standing in the archway, her hand to the wall just as I see it again and again. No-one said anything. The bird I'd been listening to had stopped calling. Then I heard the

child laughing and sharp barks from the dog. Through the window I could see Tim's head above the vines. He was running between rows of vines with the boy bouncing on his shoulders. Rees stood outside the vines—watching them.

As we left I took the manual with me. I have a compulsion to read it over and over. I keep Elen's letters and the photos she sends me of young Ben in the passionfruit section. It's Sylvie and the power of a woman's passion I think of most often though.

20