

BANTLING

Who are you
if you don't
know where
you come
from?

A story of
love, loss and
discovery

Marlowe Russell

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Cover painting by Ron Russell
Untitled, 1962, oil on canvas, 17.5mmx25.5mm

Dedication

For my parents, Ron and Arda Russell,
and their friends, and mine,
Mary and Andrew Hyde

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1 Timmy. Peckham. 1926.

The sweet soapiness of her nightie and the lovely warm smell of her. The up-down in-out breath of her, in-out up-down, the same as his, his breath for hers, hers for him, her front touch-touch-touching his back. They are one and the same. He is a leaf and she is the tide and they are bob-bob-bobbing towards the secret island. His magic shoes will take him to the castle in the sunny patch, where Ma and him will live, and Bertie and Doris can come and visit and they'll all eat jam roly-poly and chicken every day. But for now, it's as good as it gets, just being here with Ma, thumb in mouth, safe between her and anything horrid, and on guard too, against wicked shouting giants and smoky dragons.

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2 Violet. Southampton. 1923.

Southampton, 10 January 1923, Dearest Stel, Four months or so to go & the Wiggler gets livelier every day. The festive holiday was not very jolly for me. I could not help thinking about Christmas a year ago, no clouds on the horizon back then & of course next year was on my mind too. All I could see was a dirty, lonely garret. To tell the truth, I understand why a girl might find a soft & comforting pillow, have a sleepy cup of cocoa & put her head into the gas oven. Don't get me wrong - I would not be that selfish nor do anything to hurt the Wiggler. Yet some nights, lying in my bed, I think that if I was never to wake up again it would be the easiest thing for all concerned. But every morning I get up and I go on, though who knows where. I wish I could see what the future holds. Then again, which of us knows what lies ahead? Nothing fits me, least of all coats & waterproofs so I am hardly going out & you know how I turn sour when I am cooped up. If I do manage to do a bunk for an hour or two, I look like poor Mildred, who we used to laugh at along the front in Shanklin, all shrammed up against the rimey chill, layered & bundled in never-mind-what or how it smells & just be grateful if it keeps out the wet & even if it don't. On my bad days I think of her and those luckless souls like her & find myself weepy about life's injustices. I picture myself & the Wiggler sleeping in doorways and under carts, though I know full well that

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Mim & Da would not see me get that low. But how I am to look after the two of us I have only the faintest notion as yet. Who wants a book-keeper with a brat – which is how people will think of Wiggler, though I hope I never will. On the brighter side, these people here are likely sending me away to London before too long, to some place they know that will help me with my ‘pie in the sky’ (so almost everyone else tells me) idea to support and bring up the Wiggler by myself. They say it is about the only place in the country to have that sort of scheme. Perhaps there are not so many like me who are set on keeping their child. Most of the other girls here will stay here until the birth, then give their babies up for adoption. But if some folk in London will help, surely it is not as impossible as all that to do it different. Do you remember how we used to talk about London. Like they say, be careful what you wish for. You must think me ungrateful not to have mentioned your kind parcel. The olive oil works a treat on my poor itchy skin. Thank you also for the writing set. I shall take the hint & do my best to stay in touch, come what may. I will send you a postcard of Buckingham Palace too, where I will be expected for tea from time to time, don’t you know. It’s a funny old world & the gentle rain & frail moonlight fall on us all just the same. Here’s hoping 1923 treats you as well as you deserve. Keep your fingers crossed for yours truly. Always with my warmest thoughts, Violet. P.S. If you bump into you-know-who (fat chance!), you can tell

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him what you like, I don't care, but not a word to Stan. I'll deal with him as & when.

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3 Ellen. Stockwell. 1923.

'I'm cold,' whispered Ellen. 'Put your arm around me. Please.'

From Felix, a sound, more than a breath, less than a sigh.

If it's your own husband, does it count as begging?

'Just a tiny cuddle, that's all. Nothing more, unless you ...'

He shifted away, just a tad, as if only fidgeting in his sleep.

She was marooned. She was cast adrift, here, in this high, chill bed on its sea of boards and linoleum.

She turned her back to him, rolling away from the soft, saggy middle of the mattress towards its cold edges, her nightdress dragging and winding around her waist and legs. A draught seeped down her neck. In the morning, she must ask Mrs Dawson about airing a second eiderdown for the bed. She would do it first thing, as soon as Mrs Dawson arrived for work. Small mercy that her mother could not see her own daughter reduced to a single daily-woman to help her run Felix's household. And that with all that being a vicar's wife implied.

She tugged the neck of her nightdress closer.

Felix had a nerve. Lying there for all the world as though he were asleep. He could not possibly think he could fool her. Far from it. He was an open book. He

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would pass wind horribly as he woke up and dip toast fingers into his breakfast egg forty-five minutes later. He would deliver an impassioned sermon on Sunday about love and duty while she sang and bent her head and thought about shopping lists and which rugs needed to be beaten on the Monday. Then he'd come back home to collect gravy in his moustache as he ate the roast.

This was what passed as marriage. A jumble of courtesies and banalities. They lived with each other respectfully, politely, cautiously, forever circling one another at a measured distance. They were so careful that Ellen had lost track of who she might have been.

She was like a shipwrecked sailor in this marriage, words becoming rusty, her tongue swollen and clumsy with disuse, and every now and then still dreaming of rescue.

When Felix had settled again to that rhythmic snuffling of his, she got out of bed. She could see the faint embers of last night's fire in the grate on his side of the room. Nothing seemed to warm the floor where she stood. Her feet were chilly already, which reminded her. She must speak to the coal-merchant tomorrow about the next delivery.

Here was the door. She ran her hands over it. The handle had disappeared into the shadows, wasn't where it should be. There are sprites that play in the dark and they amuse themselves by making mischief for humans.

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Her fingers closed around the handle.

Move gently, Ellen, move as smoothly, as quietly, as your breath.

The latch clicked as it turned, the door caught for a moment on its frame. She must ask Mrs Dawson to oil all the latches and hinges when she had a moment. She opened the door only as much as she needed to slip into the passage.

She picked her way along the landing, staying away from the walls with their traps of small tables and trinkets. Sprites and goblins had stretched the space while she was in bed and played who knows what other tricks. Perhaps she was no longer in the upstairs hallway of her own home, but stumbling into a faerie place and time.

Better a goblin's malice than the thoughts running round her mind.

The newel at the head of the stairs appeared under her hand. One stair, two stairs, three stairs, four. On the fourth, she found the landing in its usual place. A softening in the shadows ahead must be the glass in the bathroom door. She opened the door, the click of it loud into the silence. Her feet burned on the cold tiles.

The crumpled glass of the window by the basin glittered with flecks of gold and silver from the street lamp beyond. The hem of her nightdress and the skin of her feet were mottled blue, grey, yellow by the weak light. For years, when she was still a little girl, she would creep secretly out of bed in a similar darkness

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and quiet, and watch the gas lamps being turned off in the street at dawn, one by one, the day starting before the night was done, with Ellen the sole witness. The magic and the solitude had made her special. Perhaps she had only done it for a few weeks. Mother had put a stop to it quick enough.

She sat down on the floor, pressing her back against the bath, wrapping her arms around her knees, her eyes adjusting to the dark, feeling the cold behind her, beneath her, all around. Greys and browns, slightly lighter, slightly darker, spread like lichens across the floor. Shadows shifted just out of sight. The night-dress's thick material held back some of the chill, but not for long. She waited until she shivered and could not stop shivering, the iciness touching the skin of her back, her feet, her face, her arms, spreading up her thighs, reaching her bones, numb and not numb all at once.

She pinched and twisted her nipple through the flannelette, hard, harder. As the pain rose and seized hold, she greeted a familiar friend.

She was standing on the edge of an abyss. She peered deep into it. There was no end or bottom to it. The abyss was inside her. Her foot was slipping. Any moment now she would keel over into it and be lost for ever.

This is no way to live.

You cross a line when a thought finds words.

This is no way to live.

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You frighten yourself.

There was a towel hanging over the bath. She pushed it against her nose and mouth. It was damp and musty, overdue for a wash. She whispered into it, muffling the words, wanting, not wanting, to hear them. *This is no way to live.* She was shaking. She was a marsh, she was quicksand, shifting, deep and treacherous.

She said the words softly into the dark. *This is no way to live*, the words just as powerful for being in the open. They were outside her, invisible in the dark, and they were straining inside her. She said them again. She tasted them in her mouth, their strangeness, their rightness, their heft. Words that undid her moorings. Words that spirited away her marriage, ridiculed her future, unravelled the present. They were the fairies and goblins come out to play.

A light knock on the bathroom door.

'Ellen. Are you in there, dear. Are you all right?'

He would not come in without her say-so.

'Go back to bed,' she called. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

Her eye had grown used to the dark. She stood and watched the ghostly face in the mirror. Herself and not herself. What was hidden in the mirror, looking back out. She splashed cold water over her eyes. The pipes shuddered when she turned off the tap. She must remember to ask Mrs Dawson to arrange a plumber.

Felix had left a lighted candle for her in the hallway. In its flicker, she saw streaks on her

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nightdress bodice. Blood from her breast or a shadow masquerading. She held the cloth away from her body to prevent more chaffing. She let it drop again. Her bare feet felt like glass, heavy and clumsy, about to shatter and splinter against the floor.

In the linen cupboard she found her medicine, took a sip and felt its warmth blaze in her mouth and trickle down her throat until it reached her stomach.

By her bed was a glass of water. She licked the last of the medicine from her lips and took a gulp of water, swilled it round her mouth, swallowed. Cold as it was, it did not quite quench the earlier heat, now reaching her head.

He lifted the eiderdown for her and she got into bed. Her place was already cold. He patted her shoulder.

‘Chin up,’ he said.

She put her glass feet against his for warmth. He shuddered a little and pulled away. She turned on her side, her face away from him, and pinched her hurting breast with one hand to keep the malevolent sprites at bay. There was still the faintest taste of brandy in her mouth. The bed creaked and dipped as he shifted about. She felt his warmth at her back. With a little snatch of breath when their bare skin touched, he placed his feet around hers and so they settled to sleep.

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4 Violet. Southampton. 1923.

Southampton, 20 January, Dear Mim & Da, I am keeping pretty well, all things considered, though I had a rough patch over Christmas & was much in bed, which is why you did not hear more from me. I am better now. I missed you all terribly & hope you had a fair enough time in spite of everything. They are decent Christians here & will see me on my feet again. They are trying to find a place in London I can go to, where I will be looked after & able to keep the little one also. It would be with a Christian fellowship. They set up such a scheme a few years ago, so I would not be the first. I am scared to think of going that far away to strangers, but if it comes off, it's the best offer I am likely to have. There would be a weekly charge for board & lodgings, but I can pay for most of it from my savings until I get another position, which they will help me do as well, so I do not think there will be a problem there. You have done so much already, but if you could see your way to helping me out with the doctor's & midwife's fees & other necessities, I would be everlasting grateful. I have gone over and over the figures & I will be short about ten pounds & seven shillings all in. I know it is a lot, but I will pay you back as soon as ever I can, I promise. I don't like to ask you this on top of everything else, but there is no-one else to turn to. The clergyman who delivers my letter to you will explain better than I can about the Fellowship. Please do not

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blame Stan or take against him. It is not his fault, not in the slightest. I have let him down too. My predicament is because of my own foolishness. Please do not say a word to him if you can help it. Of course, I cannot ask you to go against your consciences, so you must do as you see fit if you run into each other. But as Da always says, I should do my own dirty work. I will write to Stan in due course, but have not the foggiest what to say to him just now. If he asks after me, please just tell him I have gone to London because I wanted a change. It's true. A clean break & fresh start will be best all round. I would say sorry again & again until my voice goes hoarse, but it would not change a thing. But I am your sorry daughter & send my sorry love to you, Violet.

Who are you if you don't know where you come from? A story of love, loss and discovery.

1923. South London.

Unmarried-mother-to-be, Violet, accepts an offer of help from vicar's wife, Ellen, in the last few months of her pregnancy.

When this relationship breaks down, Violet and her baby, Sam, are forcibly separated. Sam is brought up by a woman who loves him and a man who doesn't.

Through the turbulence of war and the uncertainties of peace, Violet and Sam search for each other and try to find themselves.