

*Bobbie Rae Wilson*

## **Botanical Gardens and Men**

At first brush they don't seem to have much in common, men and botanical gardens. The gardens are always collections, someone's idea of how nature should be captured and represented, selective, ordered, the whiff of a curatorial intelligence never too far away. While men are, well, always like men, disordered, bursting out in abrupt directions, confused, all tangle and weeds. The trees in a botanical garden wear tags, as if Adam had freshly baptized them, while men act like Adam himself, as if the world were there, fresh and inexplicable, waiting to be taken, organized, named. Analogies, like husked seeds, are slippery things, saving up their point: a last unfolding.

My mother liked to say that it was a hunt. She preferred zoological imagery. She had a vision of men lurking behind trees with heavy clubs or leaping from behind when one least expected it. Sometimes they catch you, she said. Sometimes you just can't do anything about it. But women, in mother's narrative, were subtler than men. They wove nets. The threads were transparent but very strong. You caught a man by weaving him into your life. The lion with his fierce mane became a pet. The hairy caveman exchanged his massive club for garden tools. It was a hunt in any case, but always a question of opportunity and advantage. I learned to think in organic metaphors.

When I met my first husband he was standing under a gum tree. I stood briefly under the tree to read the little tag that identified it. It was still some sort of eucalyptus to me, but I would learn to call it a gum. Then he said, "My oath, this is like home. The smell's beaut." It was the exotic word, "beaut," that hooked me. The accent, too. I always have been a fool for English-sounding voices, but that one word was something special. A man who could use a word like that so confidently, as if the whole world had to understand it, must have been special himself, like an exotic tree, all massive branches and savage leaves, scat-

tering its seeds over the forests. So, like a fool, I had to ask where "home" was. And he told me. Australia. The smell and the taste of gum leaves, the vastness of space, the beaches, the sky, prawns, scallops and the world's best beer. I swallowed the whole travelogue right there on the spot in Singapore's Botanical Garden, in a few pungent gulps.

I walked with him to a nearby kiosk to let him treat me to a cup of tea. He had become Murray, a large, ruddy man, with thin blond hair in tight white trousers and a blue short-sleeved shirt with white polygons. You could sense the muscles as he walked alongside. He had a springy stride, like an athlete's, the kind when the guy's buttocks knot up into bunches of hard muscle with each pushing step. We stopped by one of the orchid collections, one of those little gardens within the big one that all botanical gardens have. They dot the Singapore Botanical Gardens. Murray explained, with that kind of authority and certainty that men know how to put into their voices, about orchids, the development of hybrid strains in Singapore, the reproductive systems. I guessed that he would want to explain that to me. I even anticipated his metaphors. He pointed out the fleshy, folding leaves, all pinks and reds. From long experience, I knew that he would turn the conversation to sex. So I stood there in Singapore with a strange Australian named Murray and waited to hear him, behind the mask of discussing orchids, fantasize my hidden topologies.

It goes like that, not sometimes but normally, when women meet men. I married him in Melbourne a few months later, leaving a good job in Toronto, friends, family and nearly everything in my life that had ever counted up to that moment. I found that I could like Melbourne, even though my friends had said that I would hate its remoteness, the distances within the city, the culture of male chauvinism, and the poisonous ockers. That last was an Australian word that means pretty much the way it sounds. Think of loud male voices. Think of beer. Think of football games. Imagine the sweat, the stink, the roar of the crowd. Now keep the picture, don't lose any effects, but reduce it to blurry postcard size. Think of two mates drinking together in a pub. Whatever else, I learned the lingo in the two years I lived there.

I liked the parks, the trams and skyscrapers that reminded me of Toronto, the quick views of Port Phillip Bay, the ethnic restaurants and the sky. Sometimes the sunsets would turn green and at other times the whole sky, rather like the tropical skies above Singapore, would fade into dark opalescence. What I really hadn't expected was that Murray would shed his international poise, the sophistication that had let him introduce himself by a coded challenge masked in botani-

cal metaphors and exuding, like rivulets of yellow pollen, the suggestion of fulfilment. Within a few weeks he had become childish, dependent and regressive. Australians call the syndrome of male bonding "mateship" but by any name a woman can recognize the flabby slide into boyhood when a man leads his life according to his friends' wishes, spends all his free time with them and becomes totally irresponsible about his relationship. Marriage becomes marginal, an imposition. And love? The pain of that word makes the throat tighten. Oh, I still believe in it, sometimes, when there are trees and the scents of flowers and water in the air. But the word is terrifyingly abstract in English.

What is concrete? Blooms, petals and stems: the reproductive organs and their systems. In Melbourne, in my marriage, it was a beery thrusting, whim-whamming, and quick male satisfaction. Murray, the man who understood orchids, who had publically fantasized my body's petaloid contours, understood nothing about my body and couldn't have cared less. He was pretty much what Australian women call a wombat: eats (,) roots and leaves. Except that he lived with me and stayed the night.

I was married to Murray for nearly two years. In the end I grew tired, not of Australia nor even of Melbourne, but of having to be a mum and a tough amazon both at the same time. And for the same man. You grow weary of constantly worrying, reminding, trying to peer forward into the unacknowledged darkness. You end up feeling defeated by the invariant need to comfort and to live the man's hopes without having any of your own, officially. And then you have to fight with him in the evenings over food, time and sex. How can you keep on living with a man who only wants to eat proteins, drink beer, spend all his free time with mates at a pub, endlessly talking Aussie Rules football, and then make love like a lumbering wombat. I guess there must be an answer since Australian women, some of them anyway, do stay married

I went back to Toronto and got the divorce later. I thought that I would never want to go back to Australia and certainly, most definitely, never again be intimate with an Australian man. Murray cried and carried on most amazingly when I told him that I was leaving. You would have thought that his mother was packing it in. Who was going to cook his tea? Who would flop backwards for his quick, male pleasures? When I landed in Toronto it was February and the snow was blowing. I had left a beaut summer in Melbourne, but I didn't

mind in the least. All I wanted was to start over, meet a considerate Canadian man and not think about marriage for years to come.

Two years and a bit later I went back to Australia. I would have bet, when I left Murray howling in the blank desert of his no-hoper's life, that I would never come back, never even drink an Australian beer again. But my immediate boss at the ad agency where I worked wanted Australian photographs. One day in September, Spring flowers blooming everywhere in Melbourne but winter thinly creasing the air in Toronto, she told me that she would like to create a file of Australian photographs. I would know what to look for. So, new visa in hand, there I was in Sydney with two weeks ahead of me in which to discover what image banks and archives existed that we could access. I could even take photos myself, though my boss wouldn't show much interest in them, I guessed. I looked for shots of cute marsupials, long curving white sand beaches, physically stunning swimmers, the Harbour and Opera House, all the usual tourist crap: dead images for Canadian consumption. I actually enjoyed Sydney and I really didn't have an intention to go to Melbourne, farther south, colder, wetter, and stinking with my rotten memories. Even so, I changed my return flight and flew down on my final Sunday morning. I expected to stay two days at the Southern Cross Hotel, visit places but not people, and generally indulge myself in short nips of nostalgia. Sourish and sharp, but not emetic.

On that Sunday afternoon, settled into an east-facing room with a view of the Treasury Gardens, Parliament House, Saint Patrick's and the bluestone inner suburbs, I decided to walk from the hotel across the Yarra River to the Botanical Gardens. It was an unusually hot spring day, the middle of October by then, so I put on a skirt, pale green with pink orchids, and a white halter. Melbourne's gardens are very lovely and much larger than those in Singapore. You open a small wooden gate and walk along a path through sweeping lawns shaded by the innumerable species of gum. For me, they could never again be, except in irony, eucalyptus trees. Then the place seems to explode into the crazyquilt diversity of plant life that good botanical gardens possess. That's the illusion of botanical gardens, you know; they look random and mad, but there is the rational order of a collection everywhere, if only you know how to look for it. And the gardens in Melbourne are wonderfully rational, as if some old German philosopher had designed them, with little bits of everything in intricate patterns. A model of what the world has to offer, if only you could take it all in.

As I walked into the gardens, I thought about Murray and that afternoon now nearly five years before when I had swallowed his bait and asked him where "home" was. You think that all those trees and flowers and bushes exist to reproduce themselves, that all plants, like all animals, lure and trick each other into the continuation of their species. Men and women may not know any single lesson greater than that which any gum knows, but they do understand more versions of the lesson and they have more ways, more strategies and lures, to implement it. There was Murray with his "home" and his trick of talking about the reproductive systems of orchids when he really had my own in mind. I had fallen for it, like an orchid, I suppose, or any female gum tree.

I was sitting at a table by the small lake in the gardens watching the black swans when I met my second husband. "Hi!" he jabbed, but suave, urbane, as he sat down, unasked, at my table. He wore a dark suit, no tie, white shirt open at the neck with elflocks of black hair tangling upwards to his neck. Bald, muscular, he was delightfully tall and lean, spectacularly carrot-shaped, like an inverted spruce tree. He didn't look much like an Australian male to my experienced eye, but the athletic type nonetheless. "I still find them bizarre," he lobbed out in the direction of the black swans. Now that, I thought, is a better gambit than mentioning "home" since I would have to ask where his home was. You must be American, I said, coldly and inviting nothing. He came from New York and held the Chair of Sociology at one of the universities in Melbourne. He had pastrami in his voice. You know, an undercurrent of sound, rough, intense, like traffic or distant power-lines, that reminds you of the kibitzers standing around a chess table in Washington Square or a knot of intellectuals from Columbia eating sandwiches and dills at some deli. I never failed to be surprised by the rasping power, the shocking penetration, of his voice. Men like to suppose that power is an aphrodisiac. Drenched in its self-confidence, Jack's voice worked that way on me.

Jack lived in South Yarra and often walked in the botanical gardens. I guessed that he walked in the gardens looking for women like myself, at loose ends, unaccompanied, open to mating calls. His right hand spread, fingers stiff, a lecturer's gesture, he pointed to the swans bobbing and gliding, thrusting their long necks for bits of bread that children threw. "It's all up-side-down here. The trees lose their bark but keep their leaves, the birds don't sing, the animals give birth before their young are actually born, and the swans are black." One thing doesn't change, of course. I could have told him that myself, but I let

him display fully his mating plumage. I felt that it would have been unfair to him, almost as if there had been a contract between us, not to let him get on with it. But I knew the line and waited for it. One thing is always the same. The sexual apparatus is in the same place and functions in the same way, although male kangaroos are supposed to be endowed with bifurcated penises. That shows up as a motif in aboriginal rock paintings and plays a role in the initiation rites of many tribes when boys spring into manhood. I remembered Murray and his discourse on orchids. You could spread out a map of the world, draw red circles around all the cities with botanical gardens, connect them all with lines, then stare at the map, thinking about, trying to imagine, all the plumage, the warbled songs, the mating dances that would be going on all at the same time, everywhere in the fecund world. Well, Jack's opening ploy was better than Murray's, but after all he was a Professor of Sociology and held his own little Chair to speak from. You must get used to speaking with authority, I guess, practice making perfect, and all that. But the pattern and the intent were much the same. Murray in Singapore had been doing pretty much what Jack was doing now. A man brings the woman's attention to his own copulatory power as quickly as he can manage, but he tries to do so by talking about something else. Those fruitful male strategies succeed obliquely. Jack played a richer orchestration than Murray had, but the melody was similar.

Jack pretended to be amazed that I was a Canadian. "Sweetheart, you're too pretty to be a Canadian. You should have come from Philadelphia, at least." He never gave up that joke. He got into the habit of introducing me to people as his wife from Philadelphia. It was never funny, even for a while, and I grew sick of being denied. I never grew sick of having sex with Jack. What Murray hadn't known about, or cared to learn, Jack understood with a master's flair. He was invariably considerate in sex, as sensitive as he was strong. Intuition, too, though that may be hard to believe about a muscular man with black hair curling out from an open collar. But I did grow weary, sick to the point of nausea, to bone-deadening fatigue, from hearing his moldy Philadelphia joke. After a bit, too much pastrami in someone's voice can drive you wild. I grew weary of cultural chauvinism, of the Woody Allen syndrome that Manhattan is the omphalos, of being denied as a Canadian. And oddly I grew weary of Jack's dislike of Australia and his contempt for its culture. I guess that I had lived there too long, and that I had picked up more from my life with Murray than I had ever believed. Places seep into you sometimes, like algae into

clear lakes, or like PCBs. I ended up defending Australia against his American warfare, high-level bombings coordinated with commando raids on all sectors of the front, and it was a losing struggle. Then I realized, finally, that in living with Jack I had to defend the entire world against the cultural claims of Manhattan. I had to prove that cities where it was impossible to buy a pastrami sandwich at three in the morning still might have something to be said for them. I began to think about Jack the way Nicaraguans must think about the Pentagon.

I left my second marriage and Melbourne for the second time. Jack didn't howl, the way Murray had. He just laughed. I was as foolish in the way I lived my life as I had been in my choice of a birthplace. There were final waves of high-level saturation bombings, and savage ranger attacks behind the persona that I had constructed for my front line defense, even up to the last minute. This time when I got back to Toronto it was summer and my hopes were high. I sailed with friends from Queen's Quay and drove up to Algoma and tried to enjoy to the fullest the beautiful things about summer in Toronto. Eventually I landed another job in publicity. And I crossed my fingers that no super smart boss would get the bright idea of sending me back to Australia for anything. Two Melbourne husbands should be enough for any Canadian woman.

You probably think that I keep clear of botanical gardens now. That's about right. Toronto doesn't have a good one anyway. Still, there are Sunday afternoons when I find myself driving east to Scarborough Bluffs. I like to go to the Guild, eat the buffet if I am with friends or, if I'm alone, just walk out into the gardens, look at all the deracinated fragments of old Toronto buildings collected there, stare out over Lake Ontario, and walk among the flower beds. Someday, I tell myself, I will be standing aimlessly by some flowers and a heavy male voice, its Scandinavian accent liltingly evident, will begin speaking just behind me. Vibrations in my ear, to start with. And it will say something like, "It is amazing, is it not? how marvellously *erect the stems grow.*" The firm underscoring in the voice will penetrate irresistibly, like baroque music or green sunsets. If it happens like that, you can bet that I'll listen: my ears open to the piercing song. It's about time that my fate collected some Northern type, cool, blue-glinting, smooth as tundra and hard as a mountain pine.