

I shall be her witness

By Linda Olsson

‘I shall be her witness.’

That’s how the book I’m reading begins. It’s a good book, I think. No, I know it is, because John gave it to me. But I keep losing the plot. Thoughts intrude so I am stuck on that first sentence.

‘I shall be her witness.’

Not my words, but they are just right. Because there is only me. And I shall be her witness. I will. She needs one. Deserves one.

It’s a silent summer evening and it feels like the aftermath of something. I guess it is. I am sitting here on this veranda where she used to sit. Where we used to sit. I squeeze my eyes half closed and gaze out over the sea that shimmers down below and I try to imagine how it would have appeared to her. I’m not sure, but I think it looked different through her eyes. More beautiful, perhaps. More interesting. I take another sip from my glass. It’s a good chardonnay. I thought I should have it for this wake. Or whatever it should be called. She liked chardonnay. She liked good things. And I think she liked sitting here. She liked innocent things. Not exactly simple things. But things that were pure. Untainted. She liked children. I put my palm on my stomach and let it rest there.

I think I only ever heard her laugh in the company of children. It would be natural to think it sad that she had none of her own. But I am not sure. She never said as such, not in so many words. That she wanted children. That *she* wanted children. She just liked children.

Like people who go to art galleries. They love the art, but it doesn't follow that they want it. I know she loved children because of the way she was with my sister's kids, for example. They range in age from one to fourteen and she seemed equally comfortable with them all. Like she had a natural rapport with them. Me, I don't. It will be hard for me.

It should have been her, not me. She was the kind of woman who should have had children. For sure. That was easy to see. And it would have changed everything, I think. Everything would have been different if she had. *She* would have been different. And I wouldn't be here.

I miss her. That's odd, because you wouldn't have expected that either. Not initially, anyway. I have experienced that only once before. Underestimating someone in that respect. It was when my father's sister died. His oldest sister, my aunt Ruby. She was not exactly unassuming, like Brenda, or elegant, but she was more of a background figure, if you know what I mean. But after she died I realised she had been absolutely essential. After she died my family crumbled. We no longer had a core, a centre. We dispersed in all directions, none good. You would never have expected it, but that's what happened. When Aunt Ruby died we lost the plot.

Brenda, well, she had no family to hold together. I don't know exactly what she held together, but it was something. Something important. Her and me. Us.

No, you would never have thought that Brenda would be missed much. She took up so little space. Not because she was short and slender, which she was, but because the very essence of her seemed so ..., well, so insignificant. For lack of a better word. In the company of other people, she would stand aside, in a corner, with her pale-blue eyes focused somewhere slightly beyond everybody else. Or not really focused at all. That's how it

appeared. She never came across as unhappy exactly, merely not quite present. As if there were an invisible wall in front of her. She simply stood still in a corner. She never looked as if she expected anything. Wanted anything. She never *did* anything. But then there were those eyes. Those beautiful, perceptive, blue eyes. And if they turned your way they changed you. They changed everything.

Me, I have always wanted something. Expected something. *Done* something. However useless. It's hard for me to try and imagine what was going on inside Brenda's head. Behind those blue eyes.

I met her at the tepid baths.

I swim twice a week. Always have, always will. It's part of me, swimming. Even now. She acted as if she had never swum before. Well, perhaps not as if she had never ever swum, but not much anyway. And she didn't like it, that much was obvious. If you know swimming, you can smell those who don't like the water. She stood there in her navy swimsuit and white cap, her nose a little red around the gills, hesitating as if she were entering shark-infested waters. I came up on my finishing lap, turned and rested on my back. She was on the ladder, still holding the railing, the water reaching her knees. Her thighs were very white, the blue veins clearly visible through her skin. Her lips were already blue.

I smiled at her, and she smiled back, her lips quivering. It was a brave smile. She took another step down on the ladder. The last step, the one with no support. She was up to her waist, still not letting go of the railing, and hanging onto it so tightly that her knuckles were white. But smiling.

I don't know what possessed me, but I took a lap towards her and held out my hand. And to this day I am not sure what possessed her when she took that last step into nothing,

and finally let go of the railing. She sank like a stone. Very quietly, of course. Like a very small stone of high density. Straight down with no fuss. And I pulled her up.

I loved her from that moment. What she felt is hard to know.

For almost four months we swam together at the tepid baths. Every Tuesday, to begin with. Then Tuesdays and Thursdays. Thursdays were awkward because it was the day the fire fighters trained. But after a while we didn't mind them so much. We would just sit and talk till they were finished.

She was bright. That was easy to miss, too. Her intelligence, I mean. The things she knew. The kind of imagination she had. No way I could follow. But it was beautiful. Fascinating. For example, Brenda told me physics is like poetry.

'And you, Paula,' she said, pointing her white finger where the skin had wrinkled from the water at me, 'you like poetry. It follows that you can like physics, too.' And looking into her eyes, I was able to believe what she said. She could make me believe anything. Believe I was beautiful. And smart. Even interesting. Yet I knew that, for all her intelligence, there were things she didn't understand.

Brenda worshipped John. That was clear from the very beginning. I had never met anyone who worshipped another person. Or anyone who was worshipped. Whenever she talked about him, which was rarely, it was in a slight whisper, like the voice you reserve for church.

'John is a good person,' she would say. 'Everybody loves him. Everybody.'

I became curious, of course. The first time she invited me to their home, I arrived with lots of anticipation. They lived in Mission Bay. Their home surprised me. It was a big house,

perched on the high cliffs above the sea and Rangitoto Island. I would never have associated Brenda with such a house. Her with that navy swimsuit and white cap. Never in a million years. But when she opened the door, she seemed different somehow. As if the setting had changed her. She wasn't wearing anything special, just a pair of blue jeans and a sweater. But I could see that the jeans were expensive, and as we hugged I could feel the softness of the grey wool of the sweater. She stood aside to let me in and then turned and smiled.

'This is John, Paula.' She opened her arms. 'John, this is Paula.' As I took John's outstretched hand, I sensed her eyes on us, and, when I turned my face to Brenda, she stood with her head cocked, watching us intently. It reminded me a bit of how my mother tried to match me with suitable playmates when I was a child. That same expectant expression, the same hope of us getting along.

He looked like a good man. As Brenda had said. He had kind brown eyes and dark hair that curled a little at the tips around the ears. I liked him. And I sensed that Brenda was relieved and happy. As if we were doing her a favour by liking each other.

It was the first of many evenings at their house. There were weekend lunches, too. Always just the three of us. And always so ... so special. It's hard to describe. Hard even for me to fully recall now. I try to go back and pick up the feeling. The atmosphere. And I realise it was all Brenda. It was as if she provided the perfect surrounding for those magical evenings and lunches. As if she had created a separate world where everything was good. Exclusively for us.

I never returned their hospitality. I think we all knew that it wouldn't have worked. In their spacious house with graceful, understated art on the walls and potted orchids, we were separated from everything else.

Her swimming didn't improve, really. And I don't think she came to like it any better. Yet she turned up twice a week, without fail. She bought herself a better swimsuit. And a pair of goggles. She didn't need them since she never put her head under the water voluntarily. In spite of my attempts at coaching her, she kept swimming like a swan, slowly and elegantly with her head high above the surface.

Then she asked if I would come with them on holiday. It was a horrible windy and wet winter day, and the idea of a holiday was tempting.

'Can't afford it,' I said, which was true. I was renting and trying to save up to buy a house. I needed a new car. Brenda looked at me with a smile behind her eyes, but she left the topic and slid back into the pool.

'I have an idea,' she said the following Tuesday. 'It's stupid that you pay that rent. John and I would like you to move in with us.'

She countered my every objection with a sensible suggestion. It *was* a good idea. They *had* masses of space. We *did* get along brilliantly. When I finally gave in and accepted the offer, Brenda smiled.

'And now we can go on holiday!' she said and bent forward and kissed me on the lips. Her cold lips tasted of chlorine.

The holiday was a success. I had never had a tropical holiday before. I didn't know what to expect. We arrived in the afternoon and were dropped off the boat onto the white beach. After the initial surprise at the familiarity of the accommodation — the small beach cottages looked as if they had been shifted straight from New Zealand — everything worked out beautifully. All meals were communal at a long table shaded by palm trees beside the sea. We swam, snorkelled, took walks around the island. It was magical.

We had ten days and gradually developed a daily pattern.

Brenda and John would meet me on the beach in the morning for a swim. Afterwards we had breakfast with the other guests. Some days we joined an excursion, but most days we just hung out on the beach, reading. John was a voracious reader. He had brought a stack of interesting books. I read a lot, but my taste is, well, not overly developed. In John's company I felt a little insecure. In an intellectual sense.

Otherwise he made me feel ... more secure than ever before. I liked the way he looked at me. The way he smiled. How he listened and patiently explained things. More than anything, how he listened with respect and interest. I liked everything about him. I liked everything about everything. It was an enchanted time.

The day Brenda went on the tour to the Blue Lagoon things changed. Well, they did and they didn't. It was the turning point, I suppose. It had begun much earlier. It felt almost fated. Like we had no say, John and I. Brenda was going, we were staying behind. John said he wanted to read. I said not much. I am not sure why I didn't go.

We were down on the beach as they set off, waving goodbye. John went back to his hammock and I sat on the sand. When he came over, I hadn't expected it. Or perhaps I had. It felt like something beyond my control, though.

He sat down beside me. Touched me lightly on my arm.

How can I describe what followed?

It happened. On her return, Brenda looked me straight in the eye and she knew. I know she did. In a way, I felt like a puppet. Helpless. But there was another side of me that wasn't a puppet at all. When she put her hand on my cheek, I blushed.

It happened only once again. But it was as if a gate had been opened. Back in Auckland, things were different. Not exactly uncomfortable. Just different.

I told Brenda about the baby. I had to. It was beginning to show.

She smiled. Bent forward and put her palms on my stomach.

‘What shall I do?’ I said.

She looked up at me, startled.

‘Do?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘What shall I do?’

‘It will be fine. It will be wonderful,’ she said. ‘You’ll see.’

I need her here now. I need her to help make this wonderful. I feel very lonely. And not very happy at all. Not wonderful at all.

When I told John, he wept. Sobbed and sobbed with tears running down his face. He turned away. I felt as if I intruded on something very private.

But he turned back and put his arms around me, hard. And he cried and cried. I couldn’t understand. I mean, it’s supposed to be a happy occasion, isn’t it? Even if this one was complicated. Complicated, but basically happy. I would have understood surprise. Even anger. Regret. But this overwhelming sadness was beyond me.

Later, I saw him hug Brenda, and I understood that it was different.

The realisation made me feel light. As if I were drifting in a dream. Not quite real.

But the baby was real.

I found myself another flat and moved out.

Brenda was beside herself. But what could I do?

She still showed up for our swims. As if nothing had happened. Or as if exactly what she had wanted had happened. She looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite interpret. Anticipation, perhaps. And she appeared happy. Honestly, she did. Of the three of us, she was the only one who seemed happy.

'You do love him, don't you?' Almost pleading.

What could I say?

Here I was with my big fat belly to prove it. But all I felt was sadness. I wanted to cry. I wanted it all to go away.

I gained a lot of weight.

But Brenda lost weight. She was almost translucent. Strangely, her swimming started to improve a little. She swam faster, longer and better than ever.

I liked John. Of course, I did. Did I love him? I don't know. I must have.

But I loved Brenda more. I *loved* Brenda. Not the casual way you say you love someone. No, I truly loved Brenda.

And then she went and killed herself. For me it's impossible to understand how anyone could do what she did. Swim out into the sea. I'm a swimmer. But Brenda never was. She walked into the sea and swam outwards. Till she was too far out. That's what she did.

John was devastated, of course.

And he didn't do what you had in mind, Brenda. He didn't love me. He just couldn't.

He gave me everything. But he left.

Because he only ever loved you, of course. You must have known that. You must have known that swimming away from us wouldn't help us at all.

So, here I am, Brenda, all by myself.

Our baby is a girl and I will call her Vera. It means the truth. She is yours and mine, Brenda.

Yours and mine.