

MAN AND OTHER  
NATURAL DISASTERS



**MAN** *& other*

**NATURAL  
DISASTERS**

a novel

Nerys Parry

ENEFIELD  
& WIZENTY

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This book is dedicated to my mother, who put me to bed with Blake's "The Tyger" and Spencer's "Beth Gellert." If these words inspired nightmares, they also gave me courage to face the dark. I also dedicate this to my children, who have sacrificed more than I'd like to admit for this book, and especially I.B., without whom I would never have known what it was like to swallow stars whole.



## PROLOGUE

### MARCH 2003

I will tell you a story.

There once was a woman I worked with, a short plump pudding of a woman, who would always talk with her mouth full. One day I overheard her telling her lunch date, between dribbles of soup and crumbs of heavily-buttered white toast, how she couldn't sleep if anything touched her neck. If, in the night, her husband's sigh crossed her throat or a shed hair tickled her windpipe, her breath would cut short and she'd wake up gasping for air.

"Maybe you were strangled in your past life," the friend suggested.

"Maybe," the woman answered, pushing aside her bowl of crusting soup. "Or maybe it's some kind of neurosis."

A year later she choked on a chicken bone and died.

"Funny," the same friend said at the wake, "she never really did like chicken."

WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR ANSWERS. From teachers, parents, God and NASA. In mother's milk, advanced shampoo formulas, Sunday editorials and visitations of the Virgin Mary. And when the answers

do come, in flakes and flurries, we hold out our palms to catch them, only to watch them dissolve under scrutiny, melt in the heat of physical contact. In the end, we are always dismayed—shocked, really—that something as fundamental and sacred as truth can change, but still in some form remain.

#### ANOTHER STORY.

After I left the hospital, I lived with a man I called old; he would have been just over forty, a bachelor with a fondness for *Wizard of Oz* memorabilia, lost boys and cherubs.

Ever since he was a boy, Claude suffered from recurring dreams of bear attacks. Grizzlies pouncing on him in a tent, in a car, in his bed. At eighteen he left the city to work at Lake Louise, thinking that confronting a real bear might drive out the phantom stalking his slumber. He camped in the woods on the weekends and took early morning walks with ears highly tuned, legs braced, ready for a death wrangle at every crack of a branch. But in the two years he worked the resort, Claude never did see a bear, only a footprint here and there, and piles of berry-pilled dung.

Now you would like me to tell you that Claude died in some ironic fashion. Maybe he was hit by a semitrailer hauling Grizzly Ale out East, or maybe he was beat up trying to pick up a Chicago Bears fanatic. But no, that would be too easy. He died in hospital of a stroke at seventy-two years old and never did see his bear, at least as far as I know, not outside of photos and TV specials.

Could Claude's dreams have been memories of a past life or of one yet to come? Is the raging grizzly symbolic of a repressed homosexuality? Or did he just watch too many reruns of *National Geographic*?

Whatever the rationale for his fear, it is not unreasonable. Bear attacks do happen, and while statistically rare and not often fatal, I imagine that mathematical equations of risk hold little relevance for a person being torn apart by a grizzly paw.

The fact is that anything can happen to anyone. There are drive-by shootings, piranha attacks, flesh eating viruses. People die impaling

themselves on utensils in dishwashers. They are crushed to death by pin sweepers as they throw themselves down bowling lanes.

So when you're tossing and turning in the night, asking yourself if you've taken your antioxidants, if you've locked the door, if you've washed the cutting board well enough after preparing the chicken, remember that in this infinitely frightening and expanding universe, the possibilities for natural disaster and human stupidity are endless. The unimaginable does happen, sometimes to the most unimaginative people. It just works out that way.

I WILL TELL YOU A SECRET.

I know how I am going to die. I do not know when, and I do not know why, but I do know how. And that is a terrible enough thing to live with.

How do I know with such certainty?

Fire, the most decisive element, devoured my sister first. Not long after her last ember had cooled, Earth swallowed my father. Then, not to be outdone, Air, the breath and will of the heavens themselves, swept up my mother.

And so you see, by some democracy of the Gods, I have been left to the Waters.

NOW I WILL TELL YOU MY STORY.



**BOOK ONE**

APRIL 1995

**WATER**

WATER HAS AN AMAZING MEMORY. *When it is ice, it forms the most perfectly bonded hydrogen structure in the world, a precisely angled crystal whose architecture is so resilient that the memory of it persists in all states. Looking at liquid water, you would think that it was just a loose collection of ions, forming and unforming relationships with other ions that pass. But look closer and you will see thousands of ice crystals continuously constructing themselves then falling apart, then struggling to rebuild again, even while the water bubbles with heat, even while it disperses in a gasp of air. The water is forever battling its compulsion to disintegrate, always fighting to remember its ideal structure.*

*Perhaps that is all memory is: the struggle to return to a perfect state.*

# 1

There is a knock. I freeze, page cutter poised mid-tear, book open before me like a patient on my table.

“Mr. Peters? Denise wants to see you.”

Someone waits, cocked outside my door. There is an anxious pause, then retreat. Soft rubber soles on dusty linoleum floors, a self-conscious pace, a slight favouring of the right leg. I make my speculations while completing the incision. It doesn't matter who it is. I don't talk to anyone when I am working. I don't talk to anyone at all if I can help it.

I inspect the paper to see if the pause has left a mark.

I WORK IN THE BASEMENT of the main branch of the Calgary City Library, in Book Repair and Maintenance. It is a large name for a department that consists of only one person—myself. I have worked here for almost thirty years, binding fractured volumes, taping torn corners, bandaging bad paperbacks.

If you looked at the library from the C-train stop at Seventh Avenue, you would be forgiven for confusing it with an upmarket

whorehouse, the way the neon light runs up the grey brick side like a laced hem on a stockinged thigh, the words staining your retina like a pink-red kiss. The entrance is wide-eyed. Stride across the blue carpet and you are walking on water, the orange plush chairs are inflated pool toys. Behind the information booths, elevators wave.

Take these to the basement—that’s where you’ll find my office, down below. On the rare wet day, you can catch the sweet smell of petrol whispering out from the concrete walls, gas ghosts that have haunted the library for as long as I can remember. It goes to show that you can’t escape where you come from, or what you’re made of. It’s only poetic justice that Calgary, a city grown fat on the business of crude, should build its memory banks over an old service station.

Calgary has from the beginning been a city of mistaken identities. Ask anyone where this city got its name and they will tell you that Calgary is the Indian word for running water. In fact, it was a Scotsman, Colonel MacLeod, who named this then rickety wood-fenced fort an abbreviation of *Cala-ghearridt* in honour of his family’s lands. Turned out that MacLeod had as poor a grasp of Gaelic as of sobriety; the Scottish name meant “bay farm” or “pasture in the harbour”—the furthest thing imaginable from this land-locked, semi-arid town.

Today Calgary’s geometry is impeccable; all streets run north and south, all avenues east and west. Ask a direction in this city, and you will be given a rank and order: “Fifth and Seventh, northeast.” Even the few streets curling like unruly hairs at the border of the city are branded to identify where they corral, so there is Crowsfoot Drive, Crowsfoot Way, Crowsfoot Place—all fenced within the square pen called Crowsfoot (of course).

But despite the method in its metropolitan madness, Calgary is still a cowtown at heart. People don’t ride downtown on a Viladi saddle and hitch their horses to the bike racks on Centre Street anymore, but you can’t pass a day here without bumping into a Stetson-toting, brass-buckled, Levi-ed rustler barking into his cell phone.

Here, when the telephone company puts you on hold, you are subjected to the croon of country and western. Bartenders serve you

with a tip of their hat, CEOs spend weekends haying at hobby ranches, and baked beans and beer are standard fare at any respectable corporate barbeque.

Having grown up on a ranch, I fail to see the romance of the cowboy. The ones I knew were wiry, poor, uneducated and unsociable. The big hats, big heels, big egos you see here in the city, they're just remnants of the Great Western myth. Because in this town of beer-bellied magnates, as in every other place weighed upon by a guilty history, it's the myth, not the fact, that always proves strongest in the end.

DENISE IS ON THE PHONE when I reach her office. She rolls eyes and chair toward the cabinet and picks up a file. Then, with one push from her thighs, skates back to her desk. Putting her hand over the receiver, she mouths *sit down*.

I move toward the only seat outside her reach, a plastic school chair currently supporting three four-inch black binders pouring inserts. I put them on the floor and sit.

Denise hangs up the phone and I am facing the wall of her torso. She is wearing red, a repellent colour on a woman.

We pause for the exertion of her smile. "As you know, Simon—" "Mr. Peters."

"Mr. Peters." Denise hauls in a breath. "You are aware, I presume, how much book damage has increased in the last ten years?"

"I was the one who compiled the statistics."

"I realize that, but what I'm concerned about—what management is concerned about—is the increasing costs of repairing these books."

"It's a lack of respect. If people would just read my memos—"

"Yes, yes. Those missives on such exciting topics as the spinal health of paperbacks."

"I never wrote one on that."

Denise rubs her forehead. "Look. I just called you here to give you a heads-up. The board has asked us to review our operations, and your department is first on our list."

"But it's already been reviewed."

“That was almost a decade ago.” She smiles, her expression almost kind. “I know. I had a hard time believing it myself.” Only now do I notice the fine hedge of grey around Denise’s hairline, and the permanent crease setting between her eyes.

When she first arrived, almost fifteen years ago, jangling with coordinating jewelry and carrying a freshly framed MBA under her jazzercised arm, she’d charged into my office and announced that she would bring the library into the modern age. There would be new processes, new standards. How in God’s name, she’d wondered aloud, had we ever managed so long without ISO 9000? And with that she’d turned on her knife-sharp heels and ripped around the corner, leaving every molecule in the air unsettled in her wake, like the magnetospheric tail left by a spinning, searching planet.

Now, all these years later, her precious ISO system is out of style and in decay, sabotaged by a dwindling and all-too-human staff unwilling or maybe unable to truly grasp the difference between documents and records. The skin on her upper arms hangs loose, and her arches have fallen to the point where she must resort to flats. Denise, like myself, has grown old.

She notices me staring at her grey, and runs a hand over her hair. “The audit’s not scheduled until August, so we’ve got time. We’ve decided to hire a summer co-op to help you build our case. I’ll come see you later to discuss the details.”

I stand up to leave. “When does he start?”

“Who?”

“The co-op student.”

Denise smiles. “Not him, Simon—her. Minerva Walters, or Miss Walters as you’d probably prefer. She’ll be starting in a few weeks.”

I walk out of Denise’s office and turn the corner. While I am recuperating in the half-light of the hallway, I hear Michael swoop into Denise’s office behind me.

“My God, Deni, was that the Yeti I just saw leaving? Have I really sighted the rare beast? And is it true, does it actually speak?”

“I don’t know if I’d exactly call it speaking.”

“Still, I guess if you’d been through what he must have been through. I mean, it must have been something awful, simply awful, to end up with hair like that. It’s been stark white since he was twenty, or ever since he came here anyway.”

“Please.”

“It’s true.”

The drawer closes. “That kind of thing doesn’t happen. I mean what could possibly turn a man’s hair white like that?”

Michael lowers his voice. “I don’t know. I’ve heard stories, though, everything from a UFO abduction to the murder of his mother right in front of his eyes.”

“Come on.”

“I’m just repeating what I’ve heard. Anyway, the only one who knows is him, and he’s not telling.”

“No, he’s not telling much of anything, as far as I can make out.” A stack of papers slaps the desk. “Have you brought that letter I asked for?”

I walk back to my office. A UFO abduction. Really. As if there aren’t enough horrors right here on earth to turn any man’s hair white without bringing in some unknowns from outer space.