

The Wifemaker

FICTION

BY CARMEN CROMER

You must unleash the beast, the travelman had told her. She looks down at the creamy limb, mottled pale blue ash, grey yellow – the fresh blood on it, still strangely surprising. Coolly she considers how her hand looks like a claw, wrapped around the limb. Through the trees comes the men's call of *falling*. A neverending call, marking each day like a metronome.

The innocent animal at her feet has been dead only shortly. The glittering dent in its head looks for all the world as if the red and creamy tree limb has caused it, the branch meeting the skull from a great height, despite it never having done so. That was the domain of the bloodied rock, laying low on the ground. She nods, satisfied, having performed this test many times, making do when finding a dead animal in the bush. She looks around. It is when the eucalypts go completely still that she feels most scared. She knows it is important not to show her fear.

Where we – I – come from, she had wanted to say to the travelman, there are no trees. Just low bushes and fields and empty, clean coastline. She'd wanted to tell him how much, every day, she needed to go back. But she didn't, because she wanted him more.

It is going to be all right, though, because now she realises that the very thing she hates most – this crackling and chalky bush, thick with sap and oil, with its claustrophobic creamy trunks marching incessantly towards her – is offering a way out.

She doesn't cover or move the animal. Death is normal here. And branches fall on animals, on men. Widow-makers – that's what they call them.

Finding much to keep you busy out here, lass? Not much like where you're from, I expect. Watch the snakes. An' the sun. An' there's bushfire on the wind, can you smell?

Her mouth won't answer. He smiles, and that is that. She falls quickly in love with the travelman. Passing through each month, *how many months have I been here*, he brings the air of other places with him. He delivers food, and parcels and sometimes post.

Bring me some ale, there's a lass. An' I'll tell you some stories you won't hear anywhere else.

She reads between his words, and sees the promise in his eyes. A promise she can't see anywhere else in the mute wall of gums, terrifying with their bare limbs and loaded eyes weeping sap. She loads up her own eyes with desire to leave with him, as he always does after two days, going to places on the edge of the island where there are streets and stone buildings, china teacups and water in blessed pipes.

She's heard of the death of a man, the husband of a wiry lined woman across the gully. The man had died slow and long and hard, under the branch of a majestic widowmaker. The man had known the trees, knew how they fell, and yet one had crept up on him, caught him by surprise with its flagrant whimsy and smashed down quietly across his body. The other treefellers, the tangle of young old bushmen who'd grown up with him since he was a boy, knew instantly in their second-hand agony how it must play out. The felled man knew, exquisitely and achingly, how it must play out. They had run for his wife and brought her to him – still with the broad bough across his crushed chest – *don't lift it, the blood will rush in and out, and he will die faster*. This way, leaving the tree in its desired spot, he'd be in deeper agony, but he had time, she had time, to say goodbye. So he lies bound to the ground, with eyes shut tight to avoid the anguish before him, to avoid his own body steaming with soulsweat and ablaze with pain. No struggle. Breath getting smaller and shorter.

She hadn't witnessed this death, but can conjure the vivid sound and visceral scent of it at her will. Again she thinks, what is this godforsaken obsession? Why do they bow to these trees so much? She greedily imagines the trees thinking, the bush plotting –

I see one in me now, a naked man on his hands and knees. I recognise the expression of excruciating despair, and see the hungry earth at his heels. I sense his hot breath, the panting of the ground. He knows he is caught within something that is beyond him. He is confused, but helpless to save himself.

Everything flows too fast for him. Ground pants, trees spin, birds dive and the dirt shifts under his feet. There is so much energy here.

He moves restlessly, like me. His eyes twitch and roll like those of dying animals. Carcasses that rot to feed me. Will he be another?

He is in awe of my wildness, wilderness, of my trees that jab and shake like dancing men. I have a strength that he does not know, and never will feel. But the frenzied twist of my limbs is the same as the twist in his – perhaps we are alike in some way?

Oh, he is in such awe of me! Just look!

The bush and its shadow, malevolence, follow her, inside the hut and into her nightmares. Even when the beasts howl and sniff in the night, and she hears things padding around the building, and catches the scent of decayed animal on the warm night wind it is not them, but the trees that tear her apart. However, and she doesn't consciously allow herself to understand this, the man's death beneath the widowmaker has given her hungry thoughts something to gnaw on.

The ladies in the town, lass, you'd like the way they dress. All fancy like, 'n' with stuff that comes off the boats. Bit of a shame you're out here, hmm? Not much prettiness for you here.

No.

This bush, it's all right for the menfolk. Not really the place for a pretty young thing like you, is it? You should be in the town, looked after like. You speak real sweet. Why are you here, eh?

I have no answer. I didn't have a choice. Was not asked.

Maybe I might find you a wee bit of prettiness, and bring it you here when I come through next, hmm? What you think of that, eh lass?

She wants to scream.

Two times the travelman camps for the night in her shed, staying up late laughing and drinking with the men in the cloying smoke. *How can they laugh in this insanity?* She cleans and cooks and smiles and stabs the tin knives into the wooden table in frustration. She dares not look out the window, knows the trees will be black and flat against the peeling hut. Waiting to edge closer when no one's looking. She knows without looking that they are so black they are beyond negative, and they have such dark strength they force the blackest night around them to surrender and wilt into a mere pale metallic shadow.

She is not awake, but her eyes feel black and open. She can feel the stars in her blind eyes. She watches as the images spring tree-like from her navel. A forest grows from her thought and in it she can see the scenes she's come to dread.

I am lying on a stone-hard ground, the trees surround me. My hands are tied by my sides and I watch myself as a statue. Glinting gold idol-eyes wink too brightly in the shadows as the broken tree falls towards my clay feet. No sound, but a tiny crack appears as the tree hits. Like mould it spreads, like hungry decay on hot, broken skin. I wait, silent, as the crack turns to rumbling stones.

I wait.

A shrill note stings the air and the clay splinters like broken water. Smashes of dust and shards of rock spiral and fly. Ashes settle, and a strange dryness, strange oldness creeps across my skin. Drumbeats in my chest as everything feels a little tighter. A little wiser. And I've just witnessed my own end.

The bush has a calendar she doesn't yet understand. It's high summer, though, when she is bitten by the jumping ants, *stupid, stupid, should know them by now*, and is sick in the bushes. The travelman says he knows a good fix, puts a strange-smelling compress on her leg while she sits and then passes her a rough little notebook, twitched shut with twine.

Have a read, lass, an' tell me your thoughts.

You know I can read. She swells inside. You know me so well. Then – horrified and excited by what she reads. You wrote this?

I wrote that, he says, reading her mind again. Did you think I was just a salesman, hmm? Someone who peddles cheap wares and ferries things for others... Do you think I'd be satisfied with that... d'you like what I've written, lass?

She nods.

There is a delicate beast inside me, he whispers near her ear. I must unleash the beast in order to write. Her breath traps as he tightens the wrapping around her leg. Constricting her blood, making her limb more creamy.

And you, lass, you must also unleash the beast.

It is the very next day when she wraps her brand new desire around her, emboldening her basic core, and finds herself standing near the felling fields. She watches the men work. Bringing down loose branches – those silent widowmakers – with pieces of rope, before cutting down the trees. She watches the men sling the rope over dead limbs, watches their easy motion and the limb's acquiescence and sees that there is no unspoken agreement between the men and the trees, though the men don't know this. A tree will easily give up its limbs in order to lull the men into deadly relaxation, saving the largest and best for the last.

She shuts her eyes and goes into her old world, where it rains, the air is cool and there is softness beneath her feet.

I'm nothing here, she screams at the travelman, even though he is too far away to hear and her mouth doesn't open. I'm held back from myself and back from the edges of the island. I'm meant for more than standing all day on a dust floor with the dust up my legs, under my skirt, and the flies on my sweaty arms and lips, and the animal shit on my feet.

But even as her mind is screaming, the idea seeds, takes full root and grows fast.

Silently sliding her palm over the cool flesh of a big tree. It's her first one, and her hands are shaking. Its eyes look at her, weeping pink sap. She stands back, narrows her lids and judges the branches. Swings the rope easily (dress stays loosened to allow movement and full and proper breathing), and the rope goes over almost too easily and the free end plummets down to her waiting hand. The triumph is immense.

No one will question it, she knows; there are so many accidents in the bush. Some will mumble that it's a shame, tha' such a young'un shouldn'a died this way. But there will be simply no surprise at the manner of the death. Men in the bush die all the time under the limbs of these trees.

The travelman is back, *has it been four weeks already*, and she tries to catch his gaze, but he is close and talking to the wife of another treefeller. She wonders if he has brought her the pretty thing he promised, but she cannot bring herself to ask and she watches, parched, as the other wife laughs up at him through her lashed eyes.

She plunges this pain into her plan. Practises harder, to make sure. Nothing, nothing can go wrong. Each time, she heaves the rope over the branch, and pulls the branch down. Sometimes they come willingly. Not always, but she's getting clever at picking the easy ones.

Emboldened by her own physicality, she hunts out dead animals to bash on the head, thinking of the other wife as she does the bashing before placing a fallen widowmaker across the dented head to see if the shape matches. She doesn't look at their glazed eyes. She has decided she will trap and kill an animal if she runs out of fresh dead ones, but hasn't needed to. The bush keeps providing. It is as if it is willing her on, wanting her to become a dark apprentice.

Another nightmare.

Why is my backbone growing out?

Crunching bones, deceptive

And pretending to be wings.

Or are they tree branches, stripped bare?

My face, hands, feet all grow dimmer as the alien skeleton

Pulls through my back.

Dragging both thought and breath from my brain.

What does He want and why ask this way?

You are strong, lass, and still young.

I am strong and still young, as she looks at her reflection on the side of the tin can. Young enough to make a wife again.

She watches the men's muscles as they work, see how they get stronger with the swinging and the carrying. She is not allowed the meat that is saved for the men, but she can still build her muscles. She swings and swings tree limbs in her arms until the sweat blurs her eyes and she cannot stand straight. *Only four weeks to wait.* The exhaustion at night helps her sleep through the pain, but doesn't drive away the nightmares.

The end is marching closer. The sky is a sickly-rolling blend of colour, and the trees with red weeping eyes – always watching. Bushfire somewhere. She kneels at the base of a tree on beady, snappy knees. She'd give anything for rain to prick and fizz on her hot skin. She imagines that he likes her in this position, and is commanding her limbs to grow into the dirt. White, brittle roots.

I am an animal in the eyes of him. I ache for so much. The sweat on my skin is bubbling like melted glass. Why are red eyes watching? I feel red beneath me. I feel it in my belly. A nauseous red is sliding in my guts. And that yellow smoke in the churning sky? It follows me, sticks in my eyes and nostrils. My feet are as heavy as clay. Drop down, drop and crawl. Easier. I'm the animal now, running on bended limbs. My face is changing. I have a beast's red eyes, snorting nose, butting head.

Alone, when no one can see, her pretty mask cracks with a grimace, a stretch of desert lips. Around her eyes the mask sticks to her skin with tears. The bushfire smoke runs on the wind while the blue ash lightly strokes her fresh flesh. Her mind twists in agony.

Something has told her that today is the day. The travelman is due again, and although he has not spoken to her since the other wife started to draw him away, she knows that he won't leave her. So, she must be ready for him, when he arrives to take her away. *I can be a wife again.*

Maybe one day I'll take you to see my town, lass.

With those words etched everywhere she looks, she weighs the rock in her hand. In her strong hands, with her even stronger forearms tensed and ready. She glances around her, moving just her eyes through the bush and not her head. There is no one to be heard or to be seen – yet.

It is when she is imagining what she will say to the travelman, I am free, finally free, take me with you, that she hears twigs crack. Turning to see him, her own young husband, strong from tree-felling. She watches herself from above as he smiles at her well-worn and well-loved face and walks towards her, freely meeting her sap-scented trap. The rope is coiled quietly at her feet. The strong creamy limb waits quietly above her. *My wifemaker,* she quietly breathes.

She hides the hefty rock behind her as she smiles back, and extends her hand to him. ■

Carmen Cromer is the pen name of Amanda Cromer. She has worked as a professional writer and editor for 15 years – mostly in Sydney. She now lives back in her hometown of Hobart and is currently dragging her heels on publishing her first full-length crime novel, set in Tasmania. carmencromer.com