

Mermaid Dust

It says there's no need to panic.

Lizby was in one of her states, a kind of inward panic, pale and glazed. Uncle Frank was just trying to pacify her a bit. He flicked channels.

Look, there it is. No immediate cause for alarm, government says we shouldn't panic.

The words were going across the bottom of the screen.

Governments, of course, can't cope with panicking people. It doesn't mean there's no cause to panic, it just means they don't want us to.

I didn't say it though, of course. I think Lizby means more to me than anything in life.

I smiled at her. Lizby never smiles – well hardly ever – but I think she relaxed a little. She sat down anyway, and leaned her head on the wings of the chair-back.

No cause to panic, there it is again. Mr Beresford says so – now you like him. He's someone we can trust. Isn't he Flick.

Uncle did some eyebrow movements that meant don't just nod, agree with me out loud for Lizby's sake.

He's the best of the bunch, I said. I'd go with him – if he wasn't married!

Uncle frowned.

Lizby knows he's honest, I said, I don't need to tell her.

That's why they've wheeled him out of course, suddenly given him the Mermaid Bug portfolio. If any politician can bullshit us into dying passively it'll be him.

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The shack dwellers used to be the elite, the trailer people the riff-raff. Funny how it had reversed. Somehow the trailers had become glamorous, and kept up with the times; while the shacks had got run-down and mouldy.

It struck me when I came back from college – we were the riff-raff now.

There wasn't much I could do about a two-room shack quaintly sagging on the edge of a trailer park. I'd have been better going on a carpentry course. But your family always want you to get educated.

Even the fragments of family I had – that had sort of adopted me, or each other. I think I was eight when Mum died. Well, she killed herself actually.

The bit I remember is arriving here, with the social worker. One of the types who just grabs the upper part of your arm instead of speaking to you. I cried all the way, I had no idea where she was taking me.

Uncle Frank – he's Mum's uncle – wasn't affectionate, but he was good-humoured. As the social worker left he said to me: Say Smell you later. I frowned. He did one of his encouraging head movements and whispered Smell you later.

Smell you later, I called after her. And sniffed and wiped my eyes.

Then he told me all about the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.

I'd never heard a fairy story like that before. But it wasn't a fairy story. A couple of days later, there he was on the telly. My new hero, replacing Aqua Marina & Co.

In those days I believed everything I saw on telly, whether it was princes or politicians or puppets. I half wish I still did.

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The Comet was very exciting. Like everyone, we watched it day after day. Closer and closer, bigger and bigger, until it was like a second, smaller moon. The Heavenly Mermaid, they were calling it, a moon with a beautiful long tail.

Obviously there were fears of weather disruptions, and also of flooding, from its effect on tides. As usual the politicians were telling us not to panic.

Coastal places were evacuated, and there was a bit of flooding. It was, as they said it would be, short-lived. In third-world countries however there were losses of life. Plenty of smug self-congratulation from our leaders for being prepared and being right about everything.

Until the dust showers.

They'd expected meteorites. There weren't many; but the dust was far more than anticipated. They admitted it – the scientists had thought it would burn up and not get through. But it was perfectly harmless.

When most of it settled in remote places in the southern hemisphere it was obviously of little concern. Australia and the Andes.

But then came the plagues. And, whether the government liked it or not, that outspoken UNESCO scientist Rosa Sangreäl, claiming they were caused by mites from the Comet.

The Sting in the Mermaid's Tail, the headline said.

It sounded like science fiction. A sort of hospital-doomsday drama as it developed, as the debate, and the facts, tumbled into the media. A frightening fairy tale we became glued to, and part of.

I fell for Rosa – my new hero. Now I was educated, a scientist should be my hero. A beautiful genius, a lone crusader. A scare-monger, the politicians called her. But championing truth, and people's right to know it.

We do have a right to know. But it cuts all ways: we know things we wish we didn't, it's the human predicament. We know we're going to die. And we are. We know for certain now.

Rosa has gone ahead. After her family in Chile were infected she left Mexico City with the Holy Mission, the last people to travel south. Mainly priests. They set off knowing they would die. Several of them wore life-sign monitoring. Within a fortnight the signals had flatlined.

There are suggestions that Rosa should be given the very last Nobel Prize. For identifying the bug that wiped out humanity. *Acarina nova aqua-puellae* Sangreal. A synopsis of the official report is in the special issue of *Nature*, following her obituary.

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I hadn't realised, even when she became my hero, that she grew up in a shack like me. Poorer even, her mother also a prostitute, a five-hour walk to the nearest mission school.

At the University of Santiago she blazed like a comet, *summa cum laude* or whatever they have there.

But at Cambridge graduate school she found herself part of a ghetto known as Latino Trash – riff-raff. That's how she got to be a campaigner as well as a scientist.

I have come into the Land of the Free to learn – to learn that I am Trash, she said in her speech to become President of Students. She was the first Hispanic President.

I could never have done that, looked it in the face and defied it like that.

White Trash, Black Trash, Halfbreed, Shackabilly – tags that hound you from your mother’s pill-jars to the grand graduation ceremony, and back to your run-down trailer park.

Rosa never went back. Not until the final Mission.

Refusing a professorship, she took the meanly-paid job of research officer in parasitology in a UNESCO funded laboratory at Mexico City Hospital. Her vivacity and campaigning zeal made her a kind of world spokesman on matters of public health, especially among riff-raff.

That meant it was every bit as easy for our masters to revile her as for us to believe her, when she broke the silence. An unrecorded species of semi-parasitic mite that had suddenly sprung up, causing these plagues across southern continents.

She didn’t just hypothesise that it was an alien creature, come down from the Comet – she stated bluntly that the authorities knew it was, but had gagged those scientists who’d found them in the dust.

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UNESCO were on the point of sacking her, the obituary claims, the very day that President Guan announced that it was in fact so.

An extra-terrestrial mite had come with the Comet dust, and appeared to be the cause of the southern hemisphere plagues. So far, it had resisted all control, he said. But there was no cause to panic.

Rosa worked on for a year to find a cure, or rather an antidote, a way of neutralising the mite’s poison. Others worked to find ways of killing it.

Born in the coldest depths of the universe, college-educated in the heat of a Comet’s tail, dropped into Earth’s atmosphere as a graduation prank: it’s not certain if anything we could do to it, even a nuclear bomb, would affect it one little bit.

Our scientists, of course, as Beresford reminds us daily, are still working. Indestructable, incurable – I’ve torn that page from my dictionary, he says. He’s a good politician.

But Rosa gave up in the end. I admired her for it – the bare honesty, the humanity of it.

Clutching a little crucifix her mother had given her when she left Chile at the age of twenty, she looked tearfully out of the telly and said there

were more important things, even than life. She must return to her mother and her mountain village and, if God willed it, die with them.

I wept, and thought of my own Mum. I don't remember her very well. Uncle Frank says Lizby is the image of her. That's doubtless why I've always felt as I do.

Hesus our Saviour died at the age of 33, Rosa said in her beautiful accent. I shall go to him with gladness. Why should I outlive him.

I agree with the obituary, it was a profound avowal of faith and humility.

Newspapers and government people slammed it as defeatism of course. They hate her even more since having to admit she was right. They try to make out she was crazy. Rosa Compares Herself to Christ, the headline said.

There's divided opinion as to whether Sangreäl means holy-grail or blood-royal. The Mexicans want her canonising before the world ends, the paper says. In the shanty-towns and box-cars, they already call her *Beata Rosa de Chile*.

Via con Deos, I muttered. As the helicopter shrank to no more than a mite in the southern sky.

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Lizby too has her crucifix, and her little shrine. I don't disparage it – if a couple of candles and a little pottery figure of the Virgin ease her mind, that's miracle enough. I believe in the Christ that comforts.

I hadn't realised until reading the obituary that Rosa and Lizby were the same age. Dark haired and light haired, tanned and pale, plump and skinny, genius and simpleton. Both beautiful, both crazy. I was slow in learning about both.

She wasn't my auntie. Though that's what I'd grown up thinking – Mum's much younger half-sister. It wasn't me they were deceiving, it had been settled as her identity long before.

Only after coming back from college did Uncle Frank have an earnest word with me. Mum had had a baby as a teenage girl, long before I was ever thought of (he said).

He seemed afraid it would ruin my opinion of her. I said it didn't make a bit of difference.

It made a difference to my feelings for Lizby though. Something clicked. My forever gazing at her; her furtive devotion to me – it suddenly made sense, or seemed to. I can't explain it.

When Uncle's at his meeting, we switch off the telly. We cuddle up, she kisses me. I give her the child she craved, she gives me the mother I lost. We console each other for the desolation of life.

I think Uncle knows and lets it go, for Lizby's sake. She's been so lonely and so sad, all her life. She's not crazy, really. Or anyway, I see it less – for I've seen beyond it.

I've seen her smile. It's the only time I've ever seen her smile.

It is your mother's face, the old Indian comments occasionally. I don't remember. I just know it melts me, it's beautiful. I can't find words for it. She has her shrine – but Lizby herself has become mine.

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They cancelled the blowing of the Canal. The mites that have appeared in Central America are windborne, as Rosa predicted. I take it to mean we're defeated, no options left. But of course Mr Beresford says scientists are working round the clock, the solution will be found, we mustn't panic.

The greatest expert, the Blessed Doctor Sangreäl, God rest her soul, turned to Jesus and gave up. A Hispanic reporter, obviously. Well our scientists aren't giving up, says Beresford smugly.

The Blessed Doctor predicted the Mermaid Dust would come with the wind, be carried the world over in winds. Some people prefer prophets of doom to good sense, says Beresford.

He's coming between us – for Lizby needs to believe him, she's so terrified and depressed by it all. By death as by life.

I can't help being fatalistic, as they're calling it, even though in my heart of hearts I want Lizby to be comforted. I want to be comforted. I don't know what to say to her any more.

What about suicide, a suicide pact. I admired Rosa for going south, to certain death, she reminded me. I'm just an armchair martyr, I quipped. She didn't think it was funny. Lizby never thinks anything's funny.

She tried it a couple of times, or so the neighbours say. Uncle does a slightly complicated head movement. It means: I won't say she did and I won't say she didn't, why speak of it. But, never after – never after I came.

Bucked her ideas up and lived for you, the old Indian says.

I hadn't thought of it that way. She was always tired and a bit distant. Yet he's right, it was as if everything she did for me was part of some special, secret bond. And now I know.

They take a particular view of craziness, Indians, they sort of respect it. She's so crazy, every day she watched for you coming along the path back from school, but ran inside before you noticed her, and acted as if you hadn't crossed her mind.

I did sometimes notice her. It's called love, isn't it, I said. The old Indian smiled. I love her too. I know you do Flick, he said, that's why I'm telling you.

What do you think of the Mermaid Bug, I said.

We're all going to die, he said. Then his face broadened into a big smile. I'm looking forward to it.

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Rosa's scientific testament, a final paper left to be published posthumously, has been put out on the internet by her colleagues in Mexico City. I got it printed out in the library.

The Mermaid Bug is God's creature too, she writes. It doesn't mean to kill us. Humanity will die. But perhaps elephants won't, perhaps dolphins or fish won't. The Bug certainly won't. Life continues.

Why should an evolutionary side-branch of the apes be the highest end of existence? Sixty million years after the dinosaurs came humans – briefly. Maybe in sixty million years' time the mites, or the fish, or even the elephants, will have evolved into something beautiful and sophisticated and intelligent, beyond anything our limitations allow us to imagine, or to be.

And perhaps God intends that too. Perhaps Jesus died for them too. Perhaps their griefs and joys are as important as ours.

Only from Heaven will we see the big picture, the hugeness of Providence. Our own tinyness.

I read bits of it to Lizby. I took the risk. At the end – she was smiling.

We don't matter, do we, she said.

I shook my head. And we put our arms round each other and rested our heads together.

And so we sit behind our shack, watching the trees bend a little.
Leaves and tiny flies dance on the water in the ditch. We wait each day
for the wind to change, for the southern breeze and a gentle baptism of
dust.

And Lizby smiles.

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